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R. G. Buchler

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVELISTS 1900–1920

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CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVELISTS
1900-1920

BY

CARL VAN DOREN

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To
FREDA KIRCHWEY

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PREFACE

The American Novel, published last year, undertook to trace the progress of a literary type in the United States from its beginnings to the end of the nineteenth century; *Contemporary American Novelists* undertakes to study the type as it has existed during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Readers of both volumes may note that in this later volume criticism has tended to supplant history. Only in writing of dead authors can the critic feel that any considerable portion of his task is done when he has arranged them in what he thinks their proper categories and their true perspective. In the case of living authors he has regularly to remember that he works with shifting materials, with figures whose dimensions and importance may be changed by growth, with persons who may desert old paths for new, reveal unsuspected attributes, increase or fade with the mere revolutions of time. All he can expect to do in dealing with any current type as fluid as the novel, is, seizing upon it at some specific moment, to examine the intentions and successes of outstanding or typical individuals and to make the most accurate report possible concerning them. Whatever general tendency there may be ought to appear from his examination.

The general tendency appearing most clearly among the novelists here studied is, of course, the drift of naturalism: initiated a full generation ago by several restless spirits, of whom E. W. Howe and Hamlin Garland are the most conspicuous survivors; continued by those young geniuses Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, all dead before their time, and by Theodore Dreiser, Robert Herrick, Upton Sinclair, happily still alive; given a fresh impulse during the shaken years of the war and of the recovery from war by such satirists as Edgar Lee Masters and Sinclair Lewis and their companions in the new revolt. The intelligent American fiction of the century has to be studied—so far as the novel is concerned—largely in terms of its agreement or its disagreement with this naturalistic tendency, which has been powerful enough to draw Winston Churchill and Booth Tarkington into an approach to its practices, to drive James Branch Cabell and Joseph Hergesheimer into explicit dissent, and to throw into strong relief the balanced independence of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. The year 1920, marking a peak in the triumph of one or two species of naturalism and in some ways closing a chapter, affords an admirable occasion to take stock. This book, indeed, was planned and begun at the close of that year and has firmly resisted the temptation to do more than glance at most of the work produced since then—even at the price of giving what must seem insufficient notice to *The Triumph of the Egg* and

Three Soldiers and of giving none at all to that still more recent masterpiece *Cytherea*. While criticism pauses to take stock, creation steadily goes on.

Acknowledgments are due *The Nation* for permission to reprint from its pages those portions of the volume which have already been published there.

CARL VAN DOREN.

March, 1922.

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CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN NOVELISTS
1900–1920

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVELISTS

CHAPTER I

OLD STYLE

1. Local Color

A study of the American novel of the twentieth century must first of all take stock of certain types of fiction which continue to persist, with varying degrees of vitality and significance, from the last quarter of the century preceding.

There is, to begin with, the type associated with the now moribund cult of local color, which originally had Bret Harte for its prophet, and which, beginning almost at once after the Civil War, gradually broadened out until it saw priests in every state and followers in every county. Obedient to the example of the prophet, most of the practitioners of the mode chose to be episodic rather than epic in their undertakings; the history of local color belongs primarily to the historian of the short story. Even when the local colorists essayed the novel they commonly did little more than to expand

some episode into elaborate dimensions or to string beads of episode upon an obvious thread. Hardly one of them ever made any real advance, either in art or reputation, upon his earliest important volume: George Washington Cable, after more than forty years, is still on the whole best represented by his *Old Creole Days;* and so—to name only the chief among the survivors—after intervals not greatly shorter are Mary N. Murfree ("Charles Egbert Craddock") by *In the Tennessee Mountains,* Thomas Nelson Page by *In Ole Virginia,* Mary E. Wilkins Freeman by *A Humble Romance and Other Stories,* James Lane Allen by *Flute and Violin,* and Alice Brown by *Meadow-Grass.*

The eager popular demand for these brevities does not entirely account for the failure of the type to go beyond its first experimental stage. The defects of local color inhere in the constitution of the cult itself, which, as its name suggests, thought first of color and then of form, first of the piquant surfaces and then—if at all—of the stubborn deeps of human life. In a sense, the local colorists were all pioneers: they explored the older communities as solicitously as they did the new, but they most of them came earliest in some field or other and found—or thought—it necessary to clear the top of the soil before they sank shaft or spade into it. Moreover, they accepted almost without challenge the current inhibitions of gentility, reticence, cheerfulness. They confined themselves to the emotions and the ideas and the language, for the most part, of the respectable; they disregarded the stormier or

stealthier behavior of mankind or veiled it with discreet periphrasis; they sweetened their narratives wherever possible with a brimming optimism nicely tinctured with amiable sentiments. Poetic justice prospered and happy endings were orthodox. To a remarkable extent the local colorists passed by the immediate problems of Americans—social, theological, political, economic; nor did they frequently rise above the local to the universal. They were, in short, ordinarily provincial, without, however, the rude durability or the homely truthfulness of provincialism at its best.

To reflect upon the achievements of this dwindling cult is to discover that it invented few memorable plots, devised almost no new styles, created little that was genuinely original in its modes of truth or beauty, and even added but the scantiest handful of characters to the great gallery of the imagination. What local color did was to fit obliging fiction to resisting fact in so many native regions that the entire country came in some degree to see itself through literary eyes and therefore in some degree to feel civilized by the sight. This is, indeed, one of the important processes of civilization. But in this case it was limited in its influence by the habits of vision which the local colorists had. They scrutinized their world at the instigation of benevolence rather than at that of intelligence; they felt it with friendship rather than with passion. And because of their limitations of intelligence and passion they fell naturally into routine ways and both saw and represented in accordance with this or that pre-

vailing formula. Herein they were powerfully confirmed by the pressure of editors and a public who wanted each writer to continue in the channel of his happiest success and not to disappoint them by new departures. Not only did this result in confining individuals to a single channel each but it resulted in the convergence of all of them into a few broad and shallow streams.

An excellent example may be found in the flourishing cycle of stories which, while Bret Harte was celebrating California, grew up about the life of Southern plantations before the war. The mood of most of these was of course elegiac and the motive was to show how much splendor had perished in the downfall of the old régime. Over and over they repeated the same themes: how an irascible planter refuses to allow his daughter to marry the youth of her choice and how true love finds a way; how a beguiling Southern maiden has to choose between lovers and gives her hand and heart to him who is stoutest in his adherence to the Confederacy; how, now and then, love crosses the lines and a Confederate girl magnanimously, though only after a desperate struggle with herself, marries a Union officer who has saved the old plantation from a marauding band of Union soldiers; how a pair of ancient slaves cling to their duty during the appalling years and will not presume upon their freedom even when it comes; how the gentry, though menaced by a riffraff of poor whites, nevertheless hold their heads high and shine brightly through the gloom; how some

former planter and everlasting colonel declines to be reconstructed by events and passes the remainder of his years as a courageous, bibulous, orgulous simulacrum of his once thriving self. Mr. Page's *In Ole Virginia* and F. Hopkinson Smith's *Colonel Carter of Cartersville* in a brief compass employ all these themes; and dozens of books which might be named play variations upon them without really enlarging or correcting them. All of them were kindly, humorous, sentimental, charming; almost all of them are steadily fading out like family photographs.

The South, however, did not restrict itself wholly to its plantation cycle. In New Orleans Mr. Cable daintily worked the lode which had been deposited there by a French and Spanish past and by the presence still of Creole elements in the population. Yet he too was elegiac, sentimental, pretty, even when his style was most deft and his representations most engaging. Quaintness was his second nature; romance was in his blood. Bras-Coupé, the great, proud, rebellious slave in *The Grandissimes,* belongs to the ancient lineage of those African princes who in many tales have been sold to chain and lash and have escaped from them by dying. The postures and graces and contrivances of Mr. Cable's Creoles are traditional to all the little aristocracies surviving, in fiction, from some more substantial day. Yet in spite of these conventions his better novels have a texture of genuine vividness and beauty. In their portrayal of the manners of New Orleans they have many points of quiet satire and

censure that betray a critical intelligence working seriously behind them. That critical disposition in Mr. Cable led him to disagree with the majority of Southerners regarding the justice due the Negroes; and it helped persuade him to spend the remainder of his life in a distant region.

The incident is symptomatic. While slavery still existed, public opinion in the South had demanded that literature should exhibit the institution only under a rosy light; public opinion now demanded that the problem in its new guise should still be glossed over in the old way. In neither era, consequently, could an honest novelist freely follow his observations upon Southern life in general. The mind of the herd bore down upon him and crushed him into the accepted molds. It seems a curious irony that the Negroes who thus innocently limited the literature of their section should have been the subjects of a little body of narrative which bids fair to outlast all that local color hit upon in the South. Joel Chandler Harris is not, strictly speaking, a contemporary, but Uncle Remus is contemporary and perennial. His stories are grounded in the universal traits of simple souls; they are also the whimsical, incidental mirror of a particular race during a significant—though now extinct—phase of its career. They are at once as ancient and as fresh as folk-lore.

Besides the rich planters and their slaves one other class of human beings in the South especially attracted the attention of the local colorists—the mountaineers. Certain distant cousins of this backwoods stock had

come into literature as "Pikes" or poor whites in the Far West with Bret Harte and in the Middle West with John Hay and Edward Eggleston; it remained for Charles Egbert Craddock in Tennessee and John Fox in Kentucky to discover the heroic and sentimental qualities of the breed among its highland fastnesses of the Great Smoky and Cumberland Mountains. Here again formulas sprang up and so stifled the free growth of observation that, though a multitude of stories has been written about the mountains, almost all of them may be resolved into themes as few in number as those which succeeded nearer Tidewater: how a stranger man comes into the mountains, loves the flower of all the native maidens, and clashes with the suspicions or jealousies of her neighborhood; how two clans have been worn away by a long vendetta until only one representative of each clan remains and the two forgive and forget among the ruins; how a band of highlanders defend themselves against the invading minions of a law made for the nation at large but hardly applicable to highland circumstances; how the mountain virtues in some way or other prove superior to the softer virtues—almost vices by comparison—of the world of plains and cities. These formulas, however, resulted from another cause than the popular complacency which hated to be disturbed in Virginia and Louisiana. The mountain people, inarticulate themselves, have uniformly been seen from the outside and therefore have been studied in their surface peculiarities more often than in their deeper traits of character.

And, having once entered the realm of legend, they continue to be known by the half-dozen distinguishing features which in legend are always enough for any type.

In the North and West, of course, much the same process went on as in the South among the local colorists, conditioned by the same demands and pressures. Because the territory was wider, however, in the expanding sections, the types of character there were somewhat less likely to be confined to one locality than in the section which for a time had a ring drawn round it by its past and by the difficulty of emerging from it; and because the career of North and West was not definitely interrupted by the war, the types of fiction there have persisted longer than in the South, where a new order of life, after a generation of clinging memories, has moved toward popular heroes of a new variety.

The cowboy, for instance, legitimate successor to the miners and gamblers of Bret Harte, might derive from almost any one of the states and might range over prodigious areas; it is partly accident, of course, that he stands out so sharply among the numerous conditions of men produced by the new frontier. Except on very few occasions, as in Alfred Henry Lewis's racy Wolfville stories and in Frederick Remington's vivid pictures, in Andy Adams's more minute chronicle *The Log of a Cowboy*, in Owen Wister's more sentimental *The Virginian*, and in O. Henry's more diversified *Heart of the West* and its fellows among his books, the

cowboy has regularly moved on the plane of the subliterary—in dime novels and, latterly, in moving pictures. He, like the mountaineer of the South, has himself been largely inarticulate except for his rude songs and ballads; formula and tradition caught him early and in fiction stiffened one of the most picturesque of human beings—a modern Centaur, an American Cossack, a Western picaro—into a stock figure who in a stock costume perpetually sits a bucking broncho, brandishes a six-shooter or swings a lariat, rounds up stampeding cattle, makes fierce war on Mexicans, Indians, and rival outfits, and ardently, humbly woos the ranchman's gentle daughter or the timorous schoolma'am. He still has no Homer, no Gogol, no Fenimore Cooper even, though he invites a master of some sort to take advantage of a thrilling opportunity.

The same fate of formula and tradition befell another type multiplied by the local novelists—the bad boy. His career may be said to have begun in New England, with Thomas Bailey Aldrich's reaction from the priggish manikins who infested the older "juveniles"; but Mark Twain took him up with such mastery that his subsequent habitat has usually been the Middle West, where a recognized lineage connects Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn with Mitch Miller and Penrod Schofield and their fellow-conspirators against the peace of villages. The bad boy, it must be noticed, is never really bad; he is simply mischievous. He serves as a natural outlet for the imagination of communities which are respectable but which lack reverence for

solemn dignity. He can play the wildest pranks and still be innocent; he can have his adolescent fling and then settle down into a prudent maturity. Both the influence of Mark Twain and the local color tendency toward uniformity in type have held the bad boy to a path which, in view of his character, seems singularly narrow. In book after book he indulges in the same practical jokes upon parents, teachers, and all those in authority; brags, fibs, fights, plays truant, learns to swear and smoke, with the same devices and consequences; suffers from the same agonies of shyness, the same indifference to the female sex, the same awkward inclination toward particular little girls. For the most part, thanks to the formulas, he has been examined from the angle of adult irritation or amusement; only very recently—as by Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson—has he been credited with a life and passions more or less his own and therefore as fully rounded as his stage of development permits.

The American business man, with millions of imaginations daily turned upon him, rarely appears in that fiction which sprang from local color except as the canny trader of some small town or as the ruthless magnate of some glittering metropolis. *David Harum* remains his rural avatar and *The Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son* his most popular commentary. Doubtless the existence of this type in every community tends to warn off the searchers after local figures, who have preferred, in their fashion, to be monopolists when they could. Doubtless, also, the

American business man has suffered from the critical light in which he has been studied by the reflective novelists. But though the higher grades of literature have refused to pay unstinted tribute and honor to men of wealth, the lower grades have paid almost as lavishly as life itself.

Multitudes of poor boys in popular fiction rise to affluence by the practice of the commercial virtues. To be self-made, the axiom tacitly runs, is to be well-made. Time was in the United States when the true hero had to start his career, unaided, from some lonely farm, from some widow's cottage, or from some city slum; and although, with the growth of luxury in the nation, readers have come to approve the heir who puts on overalls and works up in a few months from the bottom of the factory to the top, the standards of success are practically the same in all instances: sleepless industry, restless scheming, resistless will, coupled with a changeless probity in the domestic excellences. Nothing is more curious about the American business man of fiction than the sentimentality he displays in all matters of the heart. He may hold as robustly as he likes to the doctrine that business is business and that business and sympathy will not mix, but when put to the test he must always soften under the pleadings of distress and be malleable to the desires of mother, sweetheart, wife, or daughter. Even when a popular novelist sets out to be reflective—say, for example, Winston Churchill—he takes his hero up to the mountain of success and then conducts him down again to

the valley of humiliation, made conscious that the love, after all, either of his family or of his society, is better than lucre. Theodore Dreiser's stubborn habit of presenting his rich men's will to power without abatement or apology has helped to keep him steadily suspected. The popular romancers have contrived to mingle passion for money and susceptibility to moralism somewhat upon the analogy of those lucky thaumaturgists who are able to eat their cake and have it too.

A similar mixture occurs in the politician of popular tradition. He hardly ever rises to the dimensions of statesmanship, and indeed rarely belongs to the Federal government at all: Washington has always been singularly neglected by the novelists. The American politician of fiction is essentially a local personage, the boss of ward or village. Customarily he holds no office himself but instead sits in some dusty den and dispenses injustice with an even hand. Candidates fear his influence and either truckle to him or advance against him with the weapons of reform—failing, as a rule, to accomplish anything. Aldermen and legislators are his creatures. His web is out in all directions: he holds this man's mortgage, knows that man's guilty secret, discovers the other's weakness and takes advantage of it. He is cynically illiterate and contemptuous of the respectable classes. If need be he can resort to outrageous violence to gain his ends. And yet, though the reflective novelists have all condemned him for half a century, he sits fast in ordinary fiction, where he is tolerated with the amused fatalism which in actual

American life has allowed his lease to run so long. What justifies him is his success—his countrymen love success for its own sake—and his kind heart. Like Robin Hood he levies upon the plethoric rich for the deserving poor; and he yields to the tender entreaties of the widow and the orphan with amiable gestures.

The women characters evolved by the school of local color endure a serious restriction from the excessive interest taken by the novelists in the American young girl. Not only has she as a possible reader established the boundaries beyond which they might not go in speaking of sexual affairs but she has dominated the scene of their inventions with her glittering energy and her healthy bloodlessness. Some differences appear among the sections of the country as to what special phases of her character shall be here or there preferred: she is ordinarily most capricious in the Southern, most strenuous in the Western, most knowing in the New York, and most demure in the New England novels. Yet everywhere she considerably resembles a bright, cool, graceful boy pretending to be a woman. Coeducation and the scarcity of chaperons have made her self-possessed to a degree which mystifies readers not duly versed in American folkways. Though she plays at love-making almost from the cradle, she manages hardly ever to be scorched—a salamander, as one novelist suggests, sporting among the flames of life.

When native Victorianism was at its height, in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, she inclined to piety as her mode of preservation; at the present mo-

ment she inclines to a romping optimism which frightens away both thought and passion. From *The Wide, Wide World* to *Pollyanna,* however, she has taken habitual advantage of the reverence for the virgin which is one of the most pervasive elements in American popular opinion. That reverence has many charming and wholesome aspects; it has given young women a priceless freedom of movement in America without the penalty of being constantly suspected of sexual designs which they may not harbor. It must be remembered that the Daisy Millers who awaken unjust European gossip are understood at home, and that the understanding given them is a form of homage certainly no less honorable than the compliments of gallantry. In actual experience, however, girls grow up, whereas the popular fiction of the United States has done its best to keep them forever children. Nothing breaks the crystal shallows of their confidence. They are insolently secure in a world apparently made for them. The little difficulties which perturb their courtship are nine-tenths of them superficial and external matters, and the end comes as smoothly as a fairy tale's, before doubt has ever had an opportunity to shatter or passion the occasion to purge a spirit. From Hawthorne to the beginnings of naturalism there was hardly a single profound love story written in America. How could there be when green girls were the sole heroines and censors?

Among the older women created by the local color generation there were certain fashionable successes and social climbers in the large cities who have more com-

plex fortunes than the young girls; but for the most part they are merely typical or conventional—as selfish as gold and as hard as agate. On somewhat humbler levels that generation—as Mary Austin has pointed out of American fiction at large—came nearer to reality by its representation of a type peculiar to the United States: the "woman" who is also a "lady"; that is, who combines in herself the functions both of the busy housewife and of the charming ornament of her society. The gradual reduction in America of the servant class has served to develop women who keep books and music beside them at their domestic tasks as pioneer farmers kept muskets near them in the fields. They devote to homely duties the time devoted by European ladies to love, intrigue, public affairs; they preserve, thanks to countless labor-saving devices, for more or less intellectual pursuits the strength which among European women is consumed by habitual drudgery. The combination of functions has probably done much to increase sexlessness and to decrease helplessness, and so to produce almost a new species of womanhood which is bound eventually to be of great moment in the national life. Local color, however, taking the species for granted, seems hardly to have been aware of its significant existence.

Only New England emphasized a distinct type: the old maid. She has been studied in that section as in no other quarter of the world. Expansion and emigration after the Civil War drew very heavily upon the declining Puritan stock; and naturally the young men

left their native farms and villages more numerously than the young women, who remained behind and in many cases never married. Local fiction fell very largely into the hands of women—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Alice Brown—who broke completely with the age-old tradition of ridiculing spinsters no longer young. In the little cycles which these story-tellers elaborated the old maid is likely to be the center of her episode, studied in her own career and not merely in that of households upon which she is some sort of parasite. The heroine of Mrs. Freeman's *A New England Nun* is an illuminating instance: she has been betrothed to an absent, fortune-hunting lover for fourteen years, and now that he is back she finds herself full of consternation at his masculine habits and rejoices when he turns to another woman and leaves his first love to the felicity of her contented cell.

What in most literatures appears as a catastrophe appears in New England as a relief. Energy has run low in the calm veins of such women, and they have better things to do than to dwell upon the lives they might have led had marriage complicated them. Here genre painting reaches its apogee in American literature: quaint interiors scrupulously described; rounds of minute activity familiarly portrayed; skimpy moods analyzed with a delicate competence of touch. At the same time, New England literature was now too sentimental and now too realistic to allow all its old maids to remain perpetually sweet and passive. In its senti-

mental hours it liked to call up their younger days and to show them at the point which had decided or compelled their future loneliness—again and again discovering some act of abnegation such as giving up a lover because of the unsteadiness of his moral principles or surrendering him to another woman to whom he seemed for some reason or other to belong. In its realistic hours local color in New England liked to examine the atrophy of the emotions which in these stories often grows upon the celibate. One formula endlessly repeated deals with the efforts of some acrid spinster—or wife long widowed—to keep a young girl from marriage, generally out of contempt for love as a trivial weakness; the conclusion usually makes love victorious after a thunderbolt of revelation to the hinderer. There are inquiries, too, into the repressions and obsessions of women whose lives in this fashion or that have missed their flowering. Many of the inquiries are sympathetic, tender, penetrating, but most of them incline toward timidity and tameness. Their note is prevailingly the note of elegy; they are seen through a trembling haze of reticence. It is as if they had been made for readers of a vitality no more abundant than that of their angular heroines.

It would be possible to make a picturesque, precious anthology of stories dealing with the types and humors of New England. Different writers would contribute different tones: Sarah Orne Jewett the tone of faded gentility brooding over its miniature possessions in decaying seaport towns or in idyllic villages a

little further inland; Mary E. Wilkins Freeman the tone of a stern honesty trained in isolated farms and along high, exposed ridges where the wind seems to have gnarled the dispositions of men and women as it has gnarled the apple trees and where human stubbornness perpetually crops out through a covering of kindliness as if in imitation of those granite ledges which everywhere tend to break through the thin soil; Alice Brown the tone of a homely accuracy touched with the fresh hues of a gently poetical temperament. More detailed in actuality than the stories of other sections, these New England plots do not fall so readily into formulas as do those of the South and West; and yet they have their formulas: how a stubborn pride worthy of some supreme cause holds an elderly Yankee to a petty, obstinate course until grievous calamities ensue; how a rural wife, neglected and overworked by her husband, rises in revolt against the treadmill of her dull tasks and startles him into comprehension and awkward consideration; how the remnant of some once prosperous family puts into the labor of keeping up appearances an amount of effort which, otherwise expended, might restore the family fortunes; how neighbors lock horns in the ruthless litigation which in New England corresponds to the vendettas of Kentucky and how they are reconciled eventually by sentiment in one guise or another; how a young girl—there are no Tom Joneses and few Hamlets in this womanly universe—grows up bright and sensitive as a flower and suffers from the hard, stiff

frame of pious poverty; how a superb heroism springs out of a narrow life, expressing itself in some act of pitiful surrender and veiling the deed under an even more pitiful inarticulateness.

The cities of New England have been almost passed over by the local colorists; Boston, the capital of the Puritans, has singularly to depend upon the older Holmes or the visiting Howells of Ohio for its reputation in fiction. Ever since Hawthorne, the romancers and novelists of his native province have taken, one may say, to the fields, where they have worked much in the mood of Rose Terry Cooke, who called her best collection of stories *Huckleberries* to emphasize what she thought a true resemblance between the crops and characters of New England—"hardy, sweet yet spicy, defying storms of heat or cold with calm persistence, clinging to a poor soil, barren pastures, gray and rocky hillsides, yet drawing fruitful issues from scanty sources."

Alas that as time goes on the issues of such art seem less fruitful than once they seemed; that even Mrs. Freeman's *Pembroke*, one of the best novels of its class, lacks form and structure, and seems to encroach upon caricature in its study of the progress and consequences of Yankee pride. After a fecund generation of such stories Edith Wharton in *Ethan Frome* has surpassed all her native rivals in tragic power and distinction of language; Robert Frost has been able to distil the essence of all of them in three slender books of verse; Edwin Arlington Robinson in a few

brief poems has created the wistful Tilbury Town and has endowed it with pathos at once more haunting and more lasting than that of any New England village chronicled in prose; it has remained for the Pennsylvanian Joseph Hergesheimer in *Java Head* to seize most artfully upon the riches of loveliness that survive from the hour when Massachusetts was at its noon of prosperity; and local color of the orthodox tradition now persists in New England hardly anywhere except around Cape Cod, of which Joseph C. Lincoln is the dry, quaint, amusing laureate.

Through the influence, in important measure, of Howells and the *Atlantic Monthly* the modes of fiction which were practised east of Albany extended their example to other districts also: to northern New York in Irving Bacheller; to Ohio in Mary S. Watts and Brand Whitlock; to Indiana in Meredith Nicholson; to Wisconsin in Zona Gale; to Iowa and Arkansas in Alice French ("Octave Thanet"); to Kansas in William Allen White; to the Colorado mines in Mary Hallock Foote; to the Virginias in Ellen Glasgow and Henry Sydnor Harrison; to Georgia in Will N. Harben; and to other neighborhoods in other neighborly chroniclers whose mere names could stretch out to a point beyond which critical emphasis would be lost. New York City clung to less tender and more incisive habits of fiction; that city's pace for local color was set by the deft, bright Richard Harding Davis, Henry Cuyler Bunner, Brander Matthews, O. Henry—all well known figures; by the late Herman Knickerbocker

Vielé, too little known, in whose novels, such as *The Last of the Knickerbockers*, affectionate accuracy is mated with smiling, graceful humor; and by David Gray, too little known, whose *Gallops*, concerned with the horsy parish of St. Thomas Equinus near New York City, contains the most amusing stories about fashionable sports which this republic has brought forth. In the Middle West Edgar Watson Howe and Hamlin Garland, and in the Far West Frank Norris and Jack London, broke with the customary tendency by turning away from pathos toward tragedy, and away from discreet benevolence toward emphatic candor. The prevailing school of naturalism has made its principal advance upon the passing school of local color by a sacrifice of genial neighborliness; no less exact and detailed in observation than their predecessors, the naturalists have insisted upon bringing criticism in and measuring the most amiable locality by wider standards. Here lies the essential point of difference between the old style and the new.

It is by reference to this point that the credit—such as it is—of being quite contemporary must be withheld from so earnest and varied a novelist as Margaret Deland. That theological agonies like those in *John Ward, Preacher* were actually suffered a generation back and that the book is a valuable document upon the times cannot explain away the fact that Mrs. Deland herself appears to have been partly overwhelmed by the storm which sweeps the parish of her story. So in her later novels which have essayed such

problems as divorce, the compulsions of love, the inevitable clash of parents and children, she tugs at Gordian knots with the patient fingers of goodwill when one slash with the intelligence would cut her difficulties away. Suppose it possible, for instance, that the heroine of *The Awakening of Helena Richie* could have been courageous enough to go to her lover to await the death of her loathsome husband and then could have been so timid as to undergo the perturbations over her conduct which almost break her heart in Old Chester—suppose these contradictions might have dwelt together in Helena, yet could Mrs. Deland not have noted and anatomized them in a way to show that she saw the contradictions even while recording them? Suppose that Elizabeth in *The Iron Woman* was expected by her community to pay superfluously for an hour's blind folly with a lifetime of unhappiness and did undertake so to pay for it, yet could Mrs. Deland not have pointed out that the situation was repugnant both to ordinary common sense and to the very code of honor and stability which in the end persuades David and Elizabeth to give each other up?

The conclusions of these novels, which to thousands of readers have seemed stern and terrible, are in reality terrible chiefly because they are soft—soft with a sentimentalism swathed in folds of piety. The customs of Old Chester stifle its inhabitants, who take a kind of stolid joy in their fetters; and Mrs. Deland, with all her understanding, does not illuminate them. The movements of her imagination are cumbered by a too

narrow—however charming—cage. Her excellence belongs to the hours when, not trying to transcend her little Pennsylvania universe, she brings accuracy and shrewdness and felicity to the chronicles of small beer in *Old Chester Tales* and *Dr. Lavendar's People.* These strictures and this praise she earns by her adherence to the parochial cult of local color.

2. Romance

If naturalism was a reaction from the small beer of local color, so, in another fashion, was the flare-up of romance which attended and succeeded the Spanish War. History was suddenly discovered to be wonderful no less than humble life; and so was adventure in the difficult quarters of the earth. That curious, that lush episode of fiction endowed American literature with a phalanx of "best sellers" some of which still continue to be sold, in diminished numbers; and it endowed the national tradition with a host of gallant personages and heroic incidents dug up out of old books or brought back from far quests by land or water. It remains, however, an episode; the rococo romancers did not last. Almost without exception they turned to other methods as the romantic mood faded out of the populace. Of those who had employed history for their substance only James Branch Cabell remained absolutely faithful, revising, strengthening, deepening his art with irony and beauty until it became an art exquisitely peculiar to himself.

Mary Johnston was as faithful, but her fidelity had less growth in it. Originally attracted to the heroic legend of colonial Virginia, she has since so far departed from it as to produce in the *Long Roll* and *Cease Firing* a wide panorama of the Civil War, in other books to study the historic plight and current unrest of women, and here and there to show an observant consciousness of the changing world; but her imagination long ago sank its deepest roots into the traditions of the Old Dominion. She brings to them, however, no fresh interpretations, as satisfied as any medieval romancer to ring harmonious changes on ancient themes, enlarging them, perhaps, with something spacious in her language and liberal in her sentiments, yet transmitting her material rather as a singer than as a poet, agreeably rather than creatively.

As Miss Johnston leans upon history for her favorite staff, so James Lane Allen leans upon "Nature." He is not, indeed, innocent of history. His Kentucky is always conscious of its chivalric past, and his most popular romance, *The Choir Invisible*, has its scene laid in and near the Lexington of the eighteenth century. Nor is he innocent of the devices of local color. His earliest collection of tales—*Flute and Violin*—and his ingratiating comment upon it—*The Blue-Grass Region of Kentucky*—once for all established the character which his chosen district has in the world of the imagination. But from the first he held principles of art which would not allow him to consider either history or local color as ends in themselves. He believed

they must be employed, when employed, as elements contributory to some general effect of beauty or of meaning. He has built up beauty with the most deliberate hands, and he has sought to express the highest meanings in his art, seeking to look through the "thin-aired regions of consciousness which are ruled over by Tact to the underworld of consciousness where are situated the mighty workshops, and where toils on forever the cyclopean youth, Instinct."

In this important program, however, he has constantly been handicapped by his orthodoxies. John Gray, in *The Choir Invisible*, loving a woman who though in love with him is bound in marriage to another, engages himself to a young girl, shortly afterward to find that his real love is free again; yet with a high gesture of sacrifice he holds to his engagement and enters upon a union of duty which is sure to make two, and possibly three, persons unhappy instead of one, though all of them are equally guiltless. Mr. Allen approves of this immoral arithmetic with a sentimentalism which has drawn rains of tears down thoughtless cheeks. So in *The Reign of Law* he exhibits a youth extricating himself from an obsolete theology with sufferings which can be explained only on the ground that the theology was too strong ever to have been escaped or the youth too weak ever to have rebelled. And in *Aftermath*, sequel to *A Kentucky Cardinal*, the author sentimentally and quite needlessly stacks the cards against his hero and lets his heroine die, to bring, as he might say, "the eternal

note of sadness in." All this to show how "Nature" holds men in her powerful hands and tortures them when they struggle to follow the mind to liberty! To prove a thesis so profoundly true and tragic Mr. Allen can do no more than borrow the tricks of melodrama.

Just how melodramatic his sentimentalism forces him to be has often been overlooked because of his diction and his pictures. Though he tends to the mellifluous and the saccharine he has in his better pages a dewy, luminous style, with words choicely picked out and cadences delicately manipulated. By comparison most of the local colorists of his period seem homespun and most of the romancers a little tawdry. His method is the mosaicist's, working self-consciously in fine materials. Movement with him never leaps nor flows; in fact, it seems to dawdle when, too often, he forgets to be vigilant in the interests of simplicity; it is languid with scrupulous hesitations and accumulations. As to his pictures, they come from a Kentucky glorified. When he says that in June there "the warm-eyed, bronzed, foot-stamping young bucks forsake their plowshares in the green rows, their reapers among the yellow beards; and the bouncing, laughing, round-breasted girls arrange their ribbons and their vows," Mr. Allen is remembering Theocritus, the *Pervigilium Veneris*, and the silver ages of literature no less than his own state and his own day. He uses local color habitually to ennoble it, and but for his extravagant taste for sweetness he might have achieved pastorals of an imperishable sort.

Even as it is, the *Kentucky Cardinal-Aftermath* story has all the quaint grace of pressed flowers and remembered valentines, and *Summer in Arcady*, his masterpiece, has at once rich passion and spare form. Here Mr. Allen is at his best, representing young love springing up fiercely, exuberantly, against a lovely background congenial to the human mood. He has not known, however, how to keep up that difficult equilibrium between artifice and simplicity which the idyl demands. His later books tend to be turgid, oppressive, cloying with sentimentalism and amorous obsessions in their graver moments, and in their lighter moments to fall flat from a lack of the true sinews of comedy.

Of a temper as different as possible from Mr. Allen's was Edgar Saltus, just dead, who stood alone and decadent in a country which the *fin de siècle* scarcely touched with its graceful, graceless maladies. He began his career, after a penetrating study of Balzac, with *The Philosophy of Disenchantment* and *The Anatomy of Negation*, erudite, witty challenges to illusion, deriving primarily from Hartmann and Schopenhauer but enriching their arguments with much inquisitive learning in current French philosophers and poets. Erudition, however, was not Saltus's sole equipment: his pessimism came, in part, from his literary masters but in part also from a temperament which steadily followed its own impulses and arrived at its own destinations. Cynical, deracinated, he turned from his speculative doubts to the positive realities of sense,

becoming the historian of love and loveliness in sumptuous, perverse phases. In *Mary Magdalen* he dressed up a traditional courtesan in the splendors of purple and gold and perfumed her with many quaint, dangerous essences more exciting than her later career as penitent; in *Imperial Purple* he undertook a chronicle of the Roman emperors from Julius Cæsar to Heliogabolus, exhibiting them in the most splendid of all their extravagances and sins; in *Historia Amoris* he followed the maddening trail of love and in *The Lords of the Ghostland* the saddening trail of faith through the annals of mankind.

He wrote novels, too, of contemporary life, but they are his least notable achievements. His personages in none of these novels manage to convince; his plots are melodrama; his worldly wisdom has smirks and postures in it; his style, now sharp now sagging, is unequal. Saltus could not, it seems, dispense with antiquity and remoteness in his books. Only when buried in the deep world of ancient story or when ranging through the widest field of time did he become most himself. Then he invited no comparisons with familiar actualities and could assemble the most magnificent glories according to his whims and could drape them in the most gorgeous stuffs. What especially touched his imagination was the spectacle of imperial Rome as interpreted to him by French decadence: that lust for power and sensation, those incredible temples, palaces, feasts, revelries, blasphemies, butcheries. Commencing with a beauty which knew no bounds, he moved on to

lust or satiety or impotence for his theme; in the end he brought little but a glittering ferocity to that cold chronicle of the czars from Ivan to Catherine, *The Imperial Orgy*. His phrases never failed him, flashing like gems or snakes and clasping his exuberant materials in almost the only discipline they ever had. Wit withheld him from utter lusciousness. Though he employed Corinthian cadences and diction, he kept continually checking them with the cynic twist of some deft colloquialism. To venture into his microcosm is to bid farewell to all that is simple and kindly; it is, however, to discover the terrible beauty that lurks behind corruption, malevolent though delirious.

Romance of the traditionary sort, it is plain, has lately lost its vogue in the United States and is being neglected as at almost no other period since Fenimore Cooper established its principal native modes. The ancient romantic matters of the Settlement and the Revolution flourish almost solely in tales for boys. There is of course still a matter of the Frontier, but it is another frontier: the Canadian North and Northwest, Alaska, the islands of the South Seas, latterly the battle fields of France, and always the trails of American exploration wherever they may chance to lead. The performers upon such themes—the Rex Beaches, the Emerson Houghs, the Randall Parrishes, the Zane Greys, the James Oliver Curwoods—march ordinarily under the noisy banner of "red blood" and derive from Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, those generous boys of naturalism whose tempera-

ments carried them again and again into the territories of vivid danger. Criticism notes in the later annalists of "red blood" their spasmodic energy, their considerable technical knowledge, their stereotyped characters, their recurrent formulas, their uncritical, Rooseveltian opinions, their enormous popularity, their almost complete lack of distinction in style or attitude, and passes by without further obligation than to point out that Stewart Edward White probably deserves to stand first among them by virtue of a certain substantial range and panoramic faithfulness to the life of the lumbermen represented in his most successful book, *The Blazed Trail.*

This phase of life deserves particular emphasis for the reason that there has recently been growing up among the lumber-camps from the Bay of Fundy to Puget Sound the legend of a mythical hero named Paul Bunyan who is the only personage of the sort yet invented and elaborated by the ordinary run of men in any American calling. Paul is less a patron saint of the loggers than an autochthonous Munchausen, whose fame has been extended almost entirely by word of mouth among lumbermen resting from their work and vying with one another to see who could tell the most stupendous yarn about Paul's prowess and achievements. The process resembles that which in the folk everywhere has evolved enormous legends about favorite heroes; the legend concerning Paul, however, is essentially native in its accurate geography, in its passion for grotesque exaggeration, in its hilarious meta-

phors, in its dry, drawling, straight-faced narrative method. Exaggeration such as that in some of these stories verges upon genius. When Paul goes West he carelessly lets his pick drag behind him and cuts out the Grand Canyon of the Colorado; he raises corn in Kansas prodigious enough to suck the Mississippi dry and stop navigation; he builds a hotel so high that he has "the last seven stories put on hinges so's they could be swung back for to let the moon go by"; he achieves such feats of eating and drinking and working and fighting and loving as make Hercules himself seem a pallid fellow who should have gone upon the rowdy American frontier to learn the great ways of adventure. Though it is true that the legend has been developing for many years without adequate literary use of it having yet been made, it lies ready for romance to handle; and no discussion of contemporary American fiction can go deeper than the surfaces without at least mentioning that hilarious chapbook *Paul Bunyan Comes West.*

That romance is just now being slighted appears from the lamentable hiatus into which the fame of Charles D. Stewart has lately fallen. His *Partners of Providence* suffers from the inevitable comparison with *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* which it cannot stand, though it continues the saga of the Mississippi with sympathy and knowledge; but *The Fugitive Blacksmith* has a flavor which few comparisons and no neglect can spoil. Its protagonist, wrongly accused of a murder which he by mischance finds it difficult

to explain, takes to his heels and lives by his mechanic wits among the villages of the lower Mississippi through a diversity of adventures which puts his story among the little masterpieces of the picaresque. Though it is clumsily garnished with irrelevant things, it stands out above them, racy, rememberable. The blacksmith has an ingenuity as varied as his experiences. Whereas other picaroes cheat or fight or love their ways, this hero uses his dexterity at unaccustomed trades until it is little less than intoxicating to see him rise to each emergency. He is a proletarian Odysseus, and his history is a quaint *Odyssey* of the roving artisan.

The matter of the Civil War, though very large in the American memory, has in literature not quite reached a parity with the older matters of the Settlement, the Revolution, and the Frontier, principally, no doubt, because there has been only one period—and that a brief one—of historical romance since the war. In connection with this matter, however, there has been created the legend which at present is surely the most potent of all the legendary elements dear to the American imagination.

Abraham Lincoln is, strictly speaking, more than a legend; he has become a cult. Immediately after his death he lived in the national mind for a time as primarily a martyr; then emphasis shifted to his humor and a whole literature of waggish tales and retorts and apologues assembled around his name; then he passed into a more sentimental zone and endless stories were multiplied about his natural piety and his habit of

pardoning innocent offenders. Out of the efflorescence of all these aspects of legend which accompanied the centenary of his birth there has since seemed to be emerging—though the older aspects still persist as well—a conception of him as a figure at once lofty and familiar, at once sad and witty, at once Olympian and human. Among poets of all grades of opinion Lincoln is the chief native hero: Edwin Arlington Robinson has best expressed in words as firm as bronze the Master's reputation for lonely pride and forgiving laughter; John Gould Fletcher, with an eloquence found nowhere else in his work, likens Lincoln to a tree so mighty that its branches reach the heavens and its roots the primal rock and nations of men may rest in its shade; Edgar Lee Masters, whose work is full of the shadow and light of Lincoln, has made his most moving lyric an epitaph upon Ann Rutledge, the girl Lincoln loved and lost; and Vachel Lindsay, in Lincoln's own Springfield, during the World War thought of him as so stirred even in death by the horrors which then alarmed the universe that he could not sleep but walked up and down the midnight streets, mourning and brooding. It is precisely thus, in other ages, that saints are said to appear at difficult moments, to quiet the waves or turn the arrow aside. Without these more vulgar manifestations Lincoln nevertheless lives as the founder of every cult lives, in the echoes of his voice on many tongues and in the vibrations of his voice in many affections.

The novelists, unfortunately, fall behind the poets in

the beauty and wisdom with which they celebrate the figure of Lincoln, though they have produced scores of volumes associated with it, upon the life not only of Lincoln himself but of his mother, of his children, of this or that friend or neighbor. Of the various novels —from Winston Churchill's *The Crisis* to Irving Bacheller's *A Man for the Ages*—which have sought to mingle the right proportions of rural shrewdness and honorable dignity, no one has yet been equal to the magnitude of its theme. They have followed the customary paths of the historical romance without seeming to realize that in a theme so spacious they could learn from the methods of Plato with Socrates, of Shakespeare with his kingly heroes, of the biographers of Francis of Assisi with their gracious saint.

Few literary tasks are harder than the task of the critic holding a steady course through the welter of novels which make a tumult in the world and trying to indicate those which have some genuine significance as works of art or intelligence or as documents upon the time. How shall he dispose, for example, of such beguilers of the millions as Gene Stratton Porter, who piles sentimentalism upon "Nature" till the soft heap defies analysis, and Harold Bell Wright, who cannily mixes sentimentalism with valor and prudence till the resultant blend tempts appetites uncounted? Popularity has its arts no less than excellence; and so has it its own kind of seriousness. Much as the advertiser and the salesman have done to market tons of Mrs.

Porter and Mr. Wright, they could not have done it without the assistance furnished them by the fact that their authors believe and feel the things they write. They throb with all the popular impulses; they laugh when the multitude laughs and weep when it weeps; and they have the gift—which is really rare not common—of calling the multitude's attention to their books in which is displayed, as in a consoling mirror, the sweet, rosy, empty features of banality.

How shall the patient critic dispose of Robert W. Chambers, who, possessing in a high degree the qualities of narrative, of costume, of dramatic effectiveness, of satire even (as witness *Iole*), has drifted with the fashions for a generation and has latterly allowed himself to decline to the manufacture of literary sillibub in the guise of novels about the smart set and Bohemia? How shall the stern critic dispose of Gertrude Atherton, who knows so much about California, New York, and the international scene but who somehow fails to transmute her materials to any lasting metal and leaves the impression of a vexed aristocrat scolding the age without either convincing it or convicting it of very serious deficiencies? How shall the accurate critic dispose of Frank Harris, who was born in Ireland and who had the most conspicuous part of his career in England, but who is a naturalized American citizen and who has written in *The Bomb* a vivid and intelligent novel dealing with the Chicago "anarchists" of 1886? How shall the conscientious critic dispose of the Owen Johnsons and the Rupert Hugheses and the

Gouverneur Morrises and the George Barr McCutcheons with all their energy and information and good intentions and yet with their fatal lack of true distinction?

How shall the tolerant critic dispose of the writers of detective stories whose name is legion and whose art is to fine fiction as arithmetic to calculus—particularly Arthur Reeve, inventor of that Craig Kennedy who with endless ingenuity solves problem after problem by the introduction of scientific and pseudo-scientific novelties? How shall the puzzled critic dispose of Alice Duer Miller and her light, bright stories of fashionable life; of Edward Lucas White and his vast panoramas of South America and the ancient world; of Katherine Fullerton Gerould, with her grim tales and her petulant conservatism; of those energetic successors of O. Henry, Edna Ferber and Fanny Hurst; of the late Charles Emmet Van Loan, with his intimate knowledge of sport; of the schools and swarms of men and women who write short stories for the most part but who occasionally essay a novel? How shall the worried critic dispose of the more or less professional humorists who have created characters and localities: Irvin S. Cobb, who, capable of better things, prefers the paths of the grotesque and rolls his bulk through current literature laughing at his own misadventures; Finley Peter Dunne, inventor of that Mr. Dooley who makes it clear that the American tradition which invented Poor Richard is still alive; Ring W. Lardner, master of the racy vernacular of the almost

illiterate; George Ade, easily first of his class, fabulist and satirist?

Perhaps it is best for the baffled critic to leave all of them to time and, singling out the ten living novelists who seem to him most distinguished or significant, to study them one by one, adding some account of the school of fiction just now predominant.

CHAPTER II

ARGUMENT

1. Hamlin Garland

The pedigree of the most energetic and important fiction now being written in the United States goes unmistakably back to that creative uprising of discontent in the eighties of the last century which brought into articulate consciousness the larger share of the aspects of unrest which have since continued to challenge the nation's magnificent, arrogant grand march.

The decade had Henry Adams for its bitter philosopher, despairing over current political corruption and turning away to probe the roots of American policy under Jefferson and his immediate successors; had the youthful Theodore Roosevelt for its standard-bearer of a civic conscience which was, plans went, to bring virtue into caucuses; had Henry George for its spokesman of economic change, moving across the continent from California to New York with an argument and a program for new battles against privilege; had Edward Bellamy for its Utopian romancer, setting forth a delectable picture of what human society might become were the old iniquities reasonably wiped away and co-

operative order brought out of competitive chaos; had William Dean Howells for its annalist of manners, turning toward the end of the decade from his benevolent acceptance of the world as it was to stout-hearted, though soft-voiced, accusations brought in the name of Tolstoy and the Apostles against human inequality however constituted; had—to end the list of instances without going outside the literary class—Hamlin Garland for its principal spokesman of the distress and dissatisfaction then stirring along the changed frontier which so long as free land lasted had been the natural outlet for the expansive, restless race.

Heretofore the prairies and the plains had depended almost wholly upon romance—and that often of the cheapest sort—for their literary reputation; Mr. Garland, who had tested at first hand the innumerable hardships of such a life, became articulate through his dissent from average notions about the pioneer. His earliest motives of dissent seem to have been personal and artistic. During that youth which saw him borne steadily westward, from his Wisconsin birthplace to windy Iowa and then to bleak Dakota, his own instincts clashed with those of his migratory father as the instincts of many a sensitive, unremembered youth must have clashed with the dumb, fierce urges of the leaders of migration everywhere. The younger Garland hungered on the frontier for beauty and learning and leisure; the impulse which eventually detached him from Dakota and sent him on a trepid, reverent pilgrimage to Boston was the very impulse which, on

another scale, had lately detached Henry James from his native country and had sent him to the ancient home of his forefathers in the British Isles.

Mr. Garland could neither feel so free nor fly so far from home as James. He had, in the midst of his raptures and his successes in New England, still to remember the plight of the family he had left behind him on the lonely prairie; he cherished a patriotism for his province which went a long way toward restoring him to it in time. Sentimental and romantic considerations, however, did not influence him altogether in his first important work. He had been kindled by Howells in Boston to a passion for realism which carried him beyond the suave accuracy of his master to the somber veracity of *Main-Travelled Roads*, *Prairie Folks*, and *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*. This veracity was more than somber; it was deliberate and polemic. Mr. Garland, ardently a radical of the school of Henry George, had enlisted in the crusade against poverty, and he desired to tell the unheeded truth about the frontier farmers and their wives in language which might do something to lift the desperate burdens of their condition. Consequently his passions and his doctrines joined hands to fix the direction of his art; he both hated the frontier and hinted at definite remedies which he thought would make it more endurable.

It throws a strong light upon the progress of American society and literature during the past generation to point out that the service recently performed by *Main Street* was, in its fashion, performed thirty years

ago by *Main-Travelled Roads*. Each book challenges the myth of the rural beauties and the rural virtues; but whereas Sinclair Lewis, in an intellectual and satiric age, charges that the villagers are dull, Mr. Garland, in a moral and pathetic age, charged that the farmers were oppressed. His men wrestle fearfully with sod and mud and drought and blizzard, goaded by mortgages which may at almost any moment snatch away all that labor and parsimony have stored up. His women, endowed with no matter what initial hopes or charms, are sacrificed to overwork and deprivations and drag out maturity and old age on the weariest treadmill. The pressure of life is simply too heavy to be borne except by the ruthless or the crafty. Mr. Garland, though nourished on the popular legend of the frontier, had come to feel that the "song of emigration had been, in effect, the hymn of fugitives." Illusion no less than reality had tempted Americans toward their far frontiers, and the enormous mass, once under way, had rolled stubbornly westward, crushing all its members who might desire to hesitate or to reflect.

The romancers had studied the progress of the frontier in the lives of its victors; Mr. Garland studied it in the lives of its victims: the private soldier returning drably and mutely from the war to resume his drab, mute career behind the plow; the tenant caught in a trap by his landlord and the law and obliged to pay for the added value which his own toil has given to his farm; the brother neglected until his courage has died

and proffered assistance comes too late to rouse him; and particularly the daughter whom a harsh father or the wife whom a brutal husband breaks or drives away —the most sensitive and therefore the most pitiful victims of them all. Mr. Garland told his early stories in the strong, level, ominous language of a man who had observed much but chose to write little. Not his words but the overtones vibrating through them cry out that the earth and the fruits of the earth belong to all men and yet a few of them have turned tiger or dog or jackal and snatched what is precious for themselves while their fellows starve and freeze. Insoluble as are the dilemmas he propounded and tense and unrelieved as his accusations were, he stood in his methods nearer, say, to the humane Millet than to the angry Zola. There is a clear, high splendor about his landscapes; youth and love on his desolate plains, as well as anywhere, can find glory in the most difficult existence; he might strip particular lives relentlessly bare but he no less relentlessly clung to the conviction that human life has an inalienable dignity which is deeper than any glamor goes and can survive the loss of all its trappings.

Why did Mr. Garland not equal the intellectual and artistic success of *Main-Travelled Roads*, *Prairie Folks*, and *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* for a quarter of a century? At the outset he had passion, knowledge, industry, doctrine, approbation, and he labored hard at enlarging the sagas of which these books were the center. Yet *Jason Edwards*, *A Spoil of Office*, *A Mem-*

ber of the Third House are dim names and the Far Western tales which succeeded them grow too rapidly less impressive as they grow older. The rise of historical romance among the American followers of Stevenson at the end of the century and the subsequent rise of flippancy under the leadership of O. Henry have both been blamed for the partial eclipse into which Mr. Garland's reputation passed. As a matter of fact, the causes were more fundamental than the mere fickleness of literary reputation or than the demands of editors and public that he repeat himself forever. In that first brilliant cycle of stories this downright pioneer worked with the material which of all materials he knew best and over which his imagination played most eagerly. From them, however, he turned to pleas for the single tax and to exposures of legislative corruption and imbecility about which he neither knew nor cared so much as he knew and cared about the actual lives of working farmers. His imagination, whatever his zeal might do in these different surroundings, would not come to the old point of incandescence.

Instead, however, of diagnosing his case correctly Mr. Garland followed the false light of local color to the Rocky Mountains and began the series of romantic narratives which further interrupted his true growth and, gradually, his true fame. He who had grimly refused to lend his voice to the chorus chanting the popular legend of the frontier in which he had grown up and who had studied the deceptive picture not as a

visitor but as a native, now became himself a visiting enthusiast for the "high trails" and let himself be roused by a fervor sufficiently like that from which he had earlier dissented. In his different way he was as hungry for new lands as his father had been before him. Looking upon local color as the end—when it is more accurately the beginning—of fiction, he felt that he had exhausted his old community and must move on to fresher pastures.

Here the prime fallacy of his school misled him: he believed that if he had represented the types and scenes of his particular region once he had done all he could, when of course had he let imagination serve him he might have found in that microcosm as many passions and tragedies and joys as he or any novelist could have needed for a lifetime. Here, too, the prime penalty of his school overtook him: he came to lay so much emphasis upon outward manners that he let his plots and characters fall into routine and formula. The novels of his middle period—such as *Her Mountain Lover, The Captain of the Gray Horse Troop, Hester, The Light of the Star, Cavanagh, Forest Ranger*—too frequently recur to the romantic theme of a love uniting some powerful, uneducated frontiersman and some girl from a politer neighborhood. Pioneer and lady are always almost the same pair in varying costumes; the stories harp upon the praise of plains and mountains and the scorn of cities and civilization. These romances, much value as they have as documents and will long continue to have, must be said to exhibit the

frontier as self-conscious, obstreperous, given to insisting upon its difference from the rest of the world. In ordinary human intercourse such insistence eventually becomes tiresome; in literature no less than in life there is a time to remember local traits and a time to forget them in concerns more universal.

What concerns of Mr. Garland's were universal became evident when he published *A Son of the Middle Border*. His enthusiasms might be romantic but his imagination was not; it was indissolubly married to his memory of actual events. The formulas of his mountain romances, having been the inventions of a mind not essentially inventive, had been at best no more than sectional; the realities of his autobiography, taking him back again to *Main-Travelled Roads* and its cycle, were personal, lyrical, and consequently universal. All along, it now appeared, he had been at his best when he was most nearly autobiographical: those vivid early stories had come from the lives of his own family or of their neighbors; *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* had set forth what was practically his own experience in its account of a heroine—not hero—who leaves her native farm to go first to a country college and then to Chicago to pursue a wider life, torn constantly between a passion for freedom and a loyalty to the father she must tragically desert.

In a sense *A Son of the Middle Border* supersedes the fictive versions of the same material; they are the original documents and the *Son* the final redaction and commentary. Veracious still, the son of that border ap-

pears no longer vexed as formerly. Memory, parent of art, has at once sweetened and enlarged the scene. What has been lost of pungent vividness has its compensation in a broader, a more philosophic interpretation of the old frontier, which in this record grows to epic meanings and dimensions. Its savage hardships, though never minimized, take their due place in its powerful history; the defeat which the victims underwent cannot rob the victors of their many claims to glory. If there was little contentment in this border there was still much rapture. Such things Mr. Garland reveals without saying them too plainly: the epic qualities of his book—as in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*—lie in its implications; the tale itself is a candid narrative of his own adventures through childhood, youth, and his first literary period.

This autobiographic method, applied with success in *A Daughter of the Middle Border* to his later life in Chicago and all the regions which he visited, brings into play his higher gifts and excludes his lower. Under slight obligation to imagine, he runs slight risk of succumbing to those conventionalisms which often stiffen his work when he trusts to his imagination. Avowedly dealing with his own opinions and experiences, he is not tempted to project them, as in the novels he does somewhat too frequently, into the careers of his heroes. Dealing chiefly with action not with thought, he does not tend so much as elsewhere to solve speculative problems with sentiment instead of with reflection. In the *Son* and the *Daughter* he has

the fullest chance to be autobiographic without disguise.

Here lies his best province and here appears his best art. It is an art, as he employs it, no less subtle than humane. Warm, firm flesh covers the bones of his chronology. He imparts reality to this or that occasion, like a novelist, by reciting conversation which must come from something besides bare memory. He rounds out the characters of the persons he remembers with a fulness and grace which, lifelike as his persons are, betray the habit of creating characters. He enriches his analysis of the Middle Border with sensitive descriptions of the "large, unconscious scenery" in which it transacted its affairs. If it is difficult to overprize the documentary value of his saga of the Garlands and the McClintocks and of their son who turned back on the trail, so is it difficult to overpraise the sincerity and tenderness and beauty with which the chronicle was set down.

2. Winston Churchill

The tidal wave of historical romance which toward the end of the past century attacked this coast and broke so far inland as to inundate the entire continent swept Winston Churchill to a substantial peak of popularity to which he has since clung, with little apparent loss, by the exercise of methods somewhat but not greatly less romantic than those which first lifted him above the flood. He came during a moment

of national expansiveness. Patriotism and jingoism, altruism and imperialism, passion and sentimentalism shook the temper which had been slowly stiffening since the Civil War. Now, with a rush of unaccustomed emotions, the national imagination sought out its own past, luxuriating in it, not to say wallowing in it.

In Mr. Churchill it found a romancer full of consolation to any who might fear or suspect that the country's history did not quite match its destiny. He had enough erudition to lend a very considerable "thickness" to his scene, whether it was Annapolis or St. Louis or Kentucky or upland New England. He had a sense for the general bearings of this or that epoch; he had a firm, warm confidence in the future implied and adumbrated by this past; he had a feeling for the ceremonial in all eminent occasions. He had, too, a knack at archaic costume and knack enough at the idiom in which his contemporaries believed their forebears had expressed themselves. And he had, besides all these qualities needed to make his records heroic, the quality of moral earnestness which imparted to them the look of moral significance. Richard Carvel by the exercise of simple Maryland virtues rises above the enervate young sparks of Mayfair; Stephen Brice in *The Crisis* by his simple Yankee virtues makes his mark among the St. Louis rebels—who, however, are gallant and noble though misguided men; canny David Ritchie in *The Crossing* leads the frontiersmen of Kentucky as the little child of fable leads the lion and the lamb; crafty Jethro Bass in *Coniston*, though a

village boss with a pocketful of mortgages and consequently of constituents, surrenders his ugly power at the touch of a maiden's hand.

To reflect a little upon this combination of heroic color and moral earnestness is to discover how much Mr. Churchill owes to the elements injected into American life by Theodore Roosevelt. Is not *The Crossing* — to take specific illustrations — connected with the same central cycle as *The Winning of the West?* Is not *Coniston*, whatever the date of its events, an arraignment of that civic corruption which Roosevelt hated as the natural result of civic negligence and against which he urged the duty of an awakened civic conscience? In time Mr. Churchill was to extend his inquiries to regions of speculation into which Roosevelt never ventured, but as regards American history and American politics they were of one mind. "Nor are the ethics of the manner of our acquisition of a part of Panama and the Canal," wrote Mr. Churchill in 1918 in his essay on *The American Contribution and the Democratic Idea*, "wholly defensible from the point of view of international democracy. Yet it must be remembered that President Roosevelt was dealing with a corrupt, irresponsible, and hostile government, and that the Canal had become a necessity not only for our own development, but for that of the civilization of the world." And again: "The only real peril confronting democracy is the arrest of growth."

Roosevelt himself could not have muddled an issue

better. Like him Mr. Churchill has habitually moved along the main lines of national feeling—believing in America and democracy with a fealty unshaken by any adverse evidence and delighting in the American pageant with a gusto rarely modified by the exercise of any critical intelligence. Morally he has been strenuous and eager; intellectually he has been naïve and belated. Whether he has been writing what was avowedly romance or what was intended to be sober criticism he has been always the romancer first and the critic afterwards.

And yet since the vogue of historical romance passed nearly a score of years ago Mr. Churchill has honestly striven to keep up with the world by thinking about it. One novel after another has presented some encroaching problem of American civic or social life: the control of politics by interest in *Mr. Crewe's Career;* divorce in *A Modern Chronicle;* the conflict between Christianity and business in *The Inside of the Cup;* the oppression of the soul by the lust for temporal power in *A Far Country;* the struggle of women with the conditions of modern industry in *The Dwelling-Place of Light.* Nothing has hurried Mr. Churchill or forced his hand; he has taken two or three years for each novel, has read widely, has brooded over his theme, has reinforced his stories with solid documentation. He has aroused prodigious discussion of his challenges and solutions—particularly in the case of *The Inside of the Cup.* That novel perhaps best of all exhibits his later methods. John Hodder by some

miracle of inattention or some accident of isolation has been kept in his country parish from any contact with the doubt which characterizes his age. Transferred to a large city he almost instantly finds in himself heresies hitherto only latent, spends a single summer among the poor, and in the fall begins relentless war against the unworthy rich among his congregation. Thought plays but a trivial part in Hodder's evolution. Had he done any real thinking or were he capable of it he must long before have freed himself from the dogmas that obstruct him. Instead he has drifted with the general stream and learns not from the leaders but from the slower followers of opinion. Like the politician he absorbs through his skin, gathering premonitions as to which way the crowd is going and then rushing off in that direction.

If this recalls the processes of Roosevelt, hardly less does it recall those of Mr. Churchill. Once taken by an idea for a novel he has always burned with it as if it were as new to the world as to him. Here lies, without much question, the secret of that genuine earnestness which pervades all his books: he writes out of the contagious passion of a recent convert or a still excited discoverer. Here lies, too, without much question, the secret of Mr. Churchill's success in holding his audiences: a sort of unconscious politician among novelists, he gathers his premonitions at happy moments, when the drift is already setting in. Never once has Mr. Churchill, like a philosopher or a seer, run off alone.

Even for those, however, who perceive that he belongs intellectually to a middle class which is neither very subtle nor very profound on the one hand nor very shrewd or very downright on the other, it is impossible to withhold from Mr. Churchill the respect due a sincere, scrupulous, and upright man who has served the truth and his art according to his lights. If he has not overheard the keenest voices of his age, neither has he listened to the voice of the mob. The sounds which have reached him from among the people have come from those who eagerly aspire to better things arrived at by orderly progress, from those who desire in some lawful way to outgrow the injustices and inequalities of civil existence and by fit methods to free the human spirit from all that clogs and stifles it. But as they aspire and intend better than they think, so, in concert with them, does Mr. Churchill.

In all his novels, even the most romantic, the real interest lies in some mounting aspiration opposed to a static régime, whether the passion for independence among the American colonies, or the expanding movement of the population westward, or the crusades against slavery or political malfeasance, or the extrication of liberal temperaments from the shackles of excessive wealth or poverty or orthodoxy. Yet the only conclusions he can at all devise are those which history has devised already—the achievement of independence or of the Illinois country, the abolition of slavery, the defeat of this or that usurper of power in politics. Rarely is anything really thought out.

Compare, for instance, his epic of matrimony, *A Modern Chronicle*, with such a penetrating—if satirical—study as *The Custom of the Country*. Mrs. Wharton urges no more doctrine than Mr. Churchill, and she, like him, confines herself to the career of one woman with her successive husbands; but whereas the *Custom* is luminous with quiet suggestion and implicit commentary upon the relations of the sexes in the prevailing modes of marriage, the *Chronicle* has little more to say than that after two exciting marriages a woman is ready enough to settle peacefully down with the friend of her childhood whom she should have married in the beginning. In *A Far Country* a lawyer who has let himself be made a tool in the hands of nefarious corporations undergoes a tragic love affair, suffers conversion, reads a few books of modern speculation, and resolutely turns his face toward a new order. In the same precipitate fashion the heroine of *The Dwelling-Place of Light*, who has given no apparent thought whatever to economic problems except as they touch her individually, suffers a shock in connection with her intrigue with her capitalist employer and becomes straightway a radical, shortly thereafter making a pathetic and edifying end in childbirth. In these books there are hundreds of sound observations and elevated sentiments; the author's sympathies are, as a rule, remarkably right; but taken as a whole his most serious novels, however lifelike and well rounded their surfaces may seem, lack the upholding, articulating skeleton of thought.

Much the same lack of spiritual penetration and intellectual consistency which has kept Mr. Churchill from ever building a very notable realistic plot has kept him from ever creating any very memorable characters. The author of ten novels, immensely popular for more than a score of years, he has to his credit not a single figure—man or woman—generally accepted by the public as either a type or a person. With remarkably few exceptions he has seen his dramatis personæ from without and—doubtless for that reason—has apparently felt as free to saw and fit them to his argument as he has felt with his plots. Something preposterous in the millionaire reformer Mr. Crewe, something cantankerous and passionate in the Abolitionist Judge Whipple of *The Crisis*, above all something both tough and quaint in the up-country politician Jethro Bass in *Coniston* resisted the argumentative knife and saved for those particular persons that look of being entities in their own right which distinguishes the authentic from the artificial characters of fiction.

For the most part, however, Mr. Churchill has erred in what may be called the arithmetic of his art: he has thought of men and women as mere fractions of a unit of fiction, whereas they themselves in any but romances must be the units and the total work the sum or product of the fictive operation. Naturally he has succeeded rather worse with characters of his own creating, since his conceptions in such cases have come to him as social or political problems to be illustrated in the conduct of beings suitably shaped, than in char-

acters drawn in some measure from history, with their individualities already more or less established. Without achieving fresh or bold interpretations of John Paul Jones or George Rogers Clark or Lincoln, Mr. Churchill has added a good deal to the vividness of their legends; whereas in the case of characters not quite so historical, such as Judge Whipple and Jethro Bass, he has admirably fused his moral earnestness regarding American politics with his sense of spaciousness and color in the American past.

After the most careful reflection upon Mr. Churchill's successive studies of contemporary life one recurs irresistibly to his romances. He possesses, and has more than once displayed, a true romantic—almost a true epic—instinct. Behind the careers of Richard Carvel and Stephen Brice and David Ritchie and Jethro Bass appear the procession and reverberation of stirring days. Nearer a Walter Scott than a Bernard Shaw, Mr. Churchill has always been willing to take the memories of his nation as they have come down to him and to work them without question or rejection into his broad tapestry. A naturalistic generation is tempted to make light of such methods; they belong, however, too truly to good traditions of literature to be overlooked.

A national past has many uses, and different dispositions find in it instruction or warning, depression or exaltation. Mr. Churchill has found in the American past a cause for exaltation chiefly; after his ugliest chapters the light breaks and he closes always upon the

note of high confidence which resounds in the epics of robust, successful nations. If in this respect he has too regularly flattered his countrymen, he has also enriched the national consciousness by the colors which he has brought back from his impassioned forays. Only now and then, it must be remembered, do historical novels pass in their original form from one generation to another; more frequently they suffer a decomposition due to their lack of essential truth and descend to the function of compost for succeeding harvests of romance. Though probably but one or two of Mr. Churchill's books—perhaps not even one—can be expected to outlast a generation with much vitality, he cannot be denied the honor of having added something agreeable if imponderable to the national memory and so of having served his country in one real way if not in another.

3. Robert Herrick

If the novels of Robert Herrick were nothing else they would still be indispensable documents upon that first and second decade of the twentieth century in America, when a minority unconvinced by either romance or Roosevelt set out to scrutinize the exuberant complacence which was becoming a more and more ominous element in the national character. Imperialism, running a cheerful career in the Caribbean and in the Pacific, had set the mode for average opinion; the world to Americans looked immense and the United States the most immense potentiality in it.

Small wonder then that the prevailing literature gave itself generally to large proclamations about the future or to spacious recollections of the past in which the note was hope unmodified. Small wonder either—be it said to the credit of literature—that the same period caused and saw the development of the most emphatic protest which has come from native pens since the abolition of slavery—not excepting even the literary rebels of the eighties. Much of that protest naturally expressed itself in fiction, of many orders of intelligence and competence and intention. Various voices have been louder or shriller or sweeter or in some cases more thoroughgoing than Mr. Herrick's; but his is the voice which, in fiction, has best represented the scholar's conscience disturbed by the spectacle of a tumultuous generation of which most of the members are too much undisturbed.

In particular Mr. Herrick has concerned himself with the status of women in the republic which has prided itself upon nothing more than upon its attitude toward their sex, and he has regularly insisted upon carrying his researches beyond that period of green girlhood which appears to be all of a woman's life that can interest the popular fiction-mongers. He knows, without anywhere putting it precisely into words, that the elaborate language of compliment used by Americans toward women, though deriving perhaps from a time when women were less numerous on the frontier than men and were therefore specially prized and praised, has become for the most part a hollow

language. The pioneer woman earned all the respect she got by the equal share she bore in the tasks of her laborious world. Her successor in the comfortable society which the frontier founded by its travail neither works nor breeds as those first women did. But the energy thus happily released, instead of being directed into other useful channels, has been encouraged to spend itself upon the complex arts of the parasite.

Ascribe it to the vanity of men who choose to regard women as luxurious chattels and the visible symptoms of success; ascribe it to a wasteful habit practised by a nation never compelled to make the best use of its resources; ascribe it to the craft of a sex quick to seize its advantage after centuries of disadvantage—ascribe it to whatever one will, the fact remains that the United States has evolved a widely admired type of woman who lacks the glad animal spontaneity of the little girl, the ardent abandon of the mistress, the strong loyalty of the wife, the deep, calm, fierce instincts of the mother; and who even lacks—although here a change has taken place since Mr. Herrick began to chronicle her—the confident impulse to follow her own path as an individual, irrespective of her peculiar functions. It must be remembered, of course, that Mr. Herrick has had in mind not the vast majority of women, who in the United States as everywhere else on earth still fully participate in life, but the American Woman, that traditional figure compounded of timid ice and dainty insolence and habitually tricked out with a wealth which holds the world so far away that

it cannot see how empty she really is. He has sought in his novels, by dissecting the pretty simulacrum, to show that it has little blood and less soul.

At times he writes with a biting animus. In *One Woman's Life* Milly schemes herself out of the plain surroundings into which she was born, lapses from her designs enough to marry a poor man for love but subsequently wrecks his career and wears him out by her ambitious ignorance, and before she ends the story in the arms of another husband has contrived to waste the savings of a friend of her own sex who tries to help her. In *The Healer* the doctor's wife continually drags him back from the passionate exercise of his true gift, luring him with her beauty to live in the world which nearly destroys him, though he finally comprehends the danger and escapes her. And in *Together*, its epic canvas crowded with all kinds and conditions of lovers and married couples, Mr. Herrick never spares the type. Other novelists may be content to show her glittering in her maiden plumage; he advances to the point where it becomes clear that the qualities ordinarily exalted in her are nothing but signs of an arrested spiritual and moral development. Hard and wilful enough, she never becomes mature, and she tangles the web of life with the heedless hands of a child.

A less reflective novelist might be content with blaming or satirizing her for her blind instinct to marry her richest suitor; for forcing him, once married, to support her and her children at a pitch of luxury which demands that he give up his personal aspirations in art

or science or altruism; for struggling so ruthlessly to plant her daughters in prosperous soil which will nourish the "sacred seed" of the race abundantly. Mr. Herrick, however, does not disapprove such instincts for their own sake. He sees in them an element furnishing mankind with one of its valuable sources of stability. What he assails is a national conception which endows women with these instincts in mean, trivial, unenlightened forms.

His criticism of the American Woman, indeed, is but an emphatic point in his larger criticism of human life, and he has singled her out essentially, it seems, because of the shallowness of her lovely pretenses. It is the shallowness, not the sex, which arouses him. In *The Common Lot*, in *The Memoirs of an American Citizen*, in *Clark's Field*, and in certain of the strands of *Together* it is the women who demand that, no matter what happens, they shall be allowed to live their lives upon the high plane of integrity from which the casual world is always trying to pull men and women down. Integrity in love, integrity in personal conduct, integrity in business and public affairs—this Mr. Herrick holds to with a profound, at times a bleak, consistency which has both worried and limited his readers. Integrity in love leads Margaret Pole in *Together*, for instance, from her foolish husband to her lover during one lyric episode and thereafter holds them apart in the consciousness of a love completed and not to be touched with perishable flesh. In novel after novel the characters come to grief from the

American habit of extravagance, which, as Mr. Herrick represents it, seems a serious offense against integrity—springing from a failure to control vagrant desires and tying the spirit to the need of superfluous things until it ceases to be itself. And with never wearied iteration he comes back to the problem of how the individual can maintain his integrity in the face of the temptation to get easy wealth and cut a false figure in the world.

Possibly it was a youth spent in New England that made Mr. Herrick as sensitive as he has been to the atmosphere of affairs in Chicago, where fortunes have come in like a flood during his residence there, and where the popular imagination has been primarily enlisted in the game of seeing where the next wave will break and of catching its golden spoil. Mr. Herrick has not confined himself to Chicago for his scene; indeed, he is one of the least local of American novelists, ranging as he does, with all the appearances of ease, from New England to California, from farm to factory, from city to suburb, and along the routes of pleasure which Americans take in Europe. But Chicago is the true center of his universe, and he is the principal historian in fiction of that roaring village so rapidly turned town. He has not, however, been blown with the prevailing winds. The vision that has fired most of his fellow citizens has looked to him like a tantalizing but insubstantial mirage. Something in his disposition has kept him cool while others were being made drunk with opportunity.

Is it the scholar in him, or the New Englander, or the moralist which has compelled him to count the moral cost of material expansion? In the first of his novels to win much of a hearing, *The Common Lot*, he studies the career of an architect who becomes involved in the frauds of dishonest builders and sacrifices his professional integrity for the sake of quick, dangerous profits. *The Memoirs of an American Citizen*, a precious document now too much neglected, follows a country youth of good initial impulses through his rise and progress among the packers and on to the Senate of the United States. This is one of the oldest themes in literature, one of the themes most certain to succeed with any public: Dick Whittington, the Industrious Apprentice, over again. Mr. Herrick, however, cannot merely repeat the old drama or point the old moral. His hero wriggles upward by devious ways and sharp practices, crushing competitors, diverting justice, and gradually paying for his fortune with his integrity. In the most modern idiom Mr. Herrick asks again and again the ancient question whether the whole world is worth as much as a man's soul.

That mystical rigor which permits but one answer to the question suggests to Mr. Herrick two avenues of cure from the evils accompanying the disease he broods upon. One is a return to simple living under conditions which quiet the restless nerves, allay the greedy appetites, and restore the central will. The Master in *The Master of the Inn*, Renault in *Together*, Holden in

The Healer—all of them utter and live a gospel of health which obviously corresponds to Mr. Herrick's belief. When the world grows too loud one may withdraw from it; there are still uncrowded spaces where existence marches simply. Remembering them, Mr. Herrick's imagination, held commonly on so tight a fist, slips its hood off and takes wing. And yet he knows that the north woods into which a few favored men and women may withdraw are not cure enough for the multitude. They must practise, or some one must practise for their benefit, honorable refusals in the midst of life. The architect's wife in *The Common Lot*, Harrington's sister in *The Memoirs of an American Citizen*, the clear-eyed Johnstons in *Together*—they have or attain the knowledge, which seems a paradox, that selfishness can fatally entangle the individual in the perplexities of existence and that the best chance for disentanglement may come from intelligent unselfishness.

Clark's Field amply illustrates this paradox. The field has for many years lain idle in the midst of a growing town because of a flaw in the title, and when eventually the title is quieted and the land is sold it pours wealth upon heads not educated to use it with wisdom. Here is unearned increment made flesh and converted into drama: the field that might have been home and garden and playground becomes a machine, a monster, which gradually visits evil upon all concerned. Then Adelle and her proletarian cousin, aware that the field through the corruption of a well-meant

law has grown malevolent, resolve to break the spell by surrendering their selfish interests and accepting the position of unselfish trustees to the estate until—if that time ever comes—some better means may be devised for making the earth serve the purposes of those who live upon it.

The solution does not entirely satisfy, of course. At best it is a makeshift if considered in its larger bearings. It comes near, however, to solving the problems as individuals of Adelle and her cousin, who save more in character than they lose in pocket. And it might possibly have come nearer still were it not for the handicap under which Mr. Herrick, for all his intelligence and conscience, has labored as an artist. That handicap is a certain stiffness on the plastic side of his imagination. His conceptions come to him, if criticism can be any judge, with a large touch of the abstract about them; his rationalizing intelligence is always present at their birth. Nor do his narratives, once under way, flow with the sure, effortless movement which is natural to born story-tellers. His imagination, not quite continuous enough, occasionally fails to fuse and shape disparate materials. It is likely to fall short when he essays fancy or mystery, as in *A Life for a Life;* or when he has a whimsy for amusing melodrama, as in *His Great Adventure.* The flexibility which reveals itself in humor or in the lighter irony is not one of his principal endowments. Restrained and direct as he always is so far as language goes, he cannot always keep his action absolutely in hand: this or

that person or incident now and then breaks out of the pattern; the skeleton of a formula now and then becomes too prominent.

It is his intelligence which makes his satire sharp and significant; it is his conscience which lends passion to his representation and lifts him often to a true if sober eloquence. But in at least two of his novels imagination takes him, as only imagination can take a novelist, beyond the reach of either intelligence or conscience. *Together*, a little cumbersome, a little sprawling, nevertheless glows with an intensity which gives off heat as well as light. It is more than an exhaustive document upon modern marriage; it is interpretation as well. *Clark's Field*, a sparer, clearer story, is even more than interpretation; it is a work of art springing from a spirit which has taken fire and has transmuted almost all its abstract conceptions into genuine flesh and blood. That *Clark's Field* is Mr. Herrick's latest novel heightens the expectation with which one hears that after a silence of seven years he now plans to return to fiction.

4. Upton Sinclair

The social and industrial order which has blacklisted Upton Sinclair has, while increasing his rage, also increased his art. In his youth he was primarily a lyric boy storming the ears of a world which failed to detect in his romances the promise of which he himself

was outspokenly confident. His first character—the hero of *Springtime and Harvest* and of *The Journal of Arthur Stirling*—belonged to the lamenting race of the minor poets, shaped his beauty in deep seclusion, and died because it went unrecognized. Mr. Sinclair, though he had created Stirling in his own image, did not die. Instead he began to study the causes of public deafness and found the injustices which ever since he has devoted his enormous energy to exposing. If that original motive seems inadequate and if traces of it have been partially responsible for his reputation as a seeker of personal notoriety, still it has lent ardor to his crusade. And if he had not discovered so much injustice to chronicle—if there had not been so much for him to discover—he must have lacked the ammunition with which he has fought.

As the evidences have accumulated he has been spared the need of complaining merely because another minor poet was neglected and has been able to widen his accusations until they include the whole multitude of oppressions which free spirits have to contend against when they face machines and privilege and mortmain. The industrial system which true prophets have unanimously condemned for a century and a half helped to pack Mr. Sinclair's records from the first; the war, with its vast hysteria and blind panic, made it superfluous for him to add much commentary in *Jimmie Higgins* and *100%* to the veritable episodes which he there recounted. On some occasions fact itself has the impetus of propaganda. The times have

furnished Mr. Sinclair the keen, cool, dangerous art of Thomas Paine.

To mention Paine is to rank Mr. Sinclair with the ragged philosophers among whom he properly belongs, rather than with learned misanthropes like Swift or intellectual ironists like Bernard Shaw. An expansive passion for humanity at large colors all this proletarian radical has written. By disposition very obviously a poet, working with no subtle or complex processes and without any of the lighter aspects of humor, Mr. Sinclair simply refuses to accept existence as it stands and goes on questioning it forever. *Samuel the Seeker* seems a kind of allegory of its author's own career. He, too, in the fashion of Samuel Prescott, inquires of all he meets why they tolerate injustice and demands that something or other be done at once. These are the methods of the ragged philosophers, whereas the learned understand that justice comes slowly and so rest now and then from effort; and the ironists understand that justice may never come and so now and then sit down, detached and cynical.

Naïve inquirers like Upton Sinclair take and give fewer opportunities for comfort. How can any one talk of the long ages of human progress when a child may starve to death in a few days? How can any one take refuge in irony when agony is always abroad, biting and rending? How can any one leave to others the obligation to assail injustice when the responsibility for it lies equally upon all, whether victims or victors, who permit it to continue? A questioner so

relentless can very soon bore the questioned, especially if they are less strenuous or less inflamed than he and can keep up his pitch neither of activity nor of anger; but this is no proof that such an inquiry is impertinent or that answers are impossible. Indeed, the chances are that the proportions of this boredom and the animosity resulting from it will depend upon the extent to which grievances do exist about which it is painful to think for the reason that they so plainly should not exist. A complacent reader of any of Mr. Sinclair's better books can stay complacent only by shutting up the book and his mind again.

Without doubt the various abuses which these books set forth have their case seriously weakened by the violent quickness with which Mr. Sinclair scents conspiracy among the enemies of justice. It is perhaps not to be wondered at that he should so often fly to this conclusion; he has himself, as his personal history in *The Brass Check* makes clear enough, been practically conspired against. But some instinct for melodrama in his constitution has led him to invent a larger number of conspirators than has been necessary to illustrate his contention.

In *Love's Pilgrimage*, for instance, Thyrsis suffers tortures from the fact that it takes time for a poet, however gifted, to make himself heard. In reality, of course, the blame for this lies in about the same quarter of the universe as that which establishes a period of years between youth and maturity; to complain too bitterly about either ruling is to waste on an inscru-

table problem the strength which might better be devoted to an annoying task. Mr. Sinclair, however, cools himself in no such philosophy. He dramatizes Thyrsis's hungry longings and cruel disappointments on Thyrsis's own terms, making the boy out a martyr with powerful forces arrayed against him in a conspiracy to keep ascendant genius down. Consequently the narrative has about it something shrill and febrile; it is keyed too high to carry full conviction to any but those who are straining at a similar leash. So also in *The Profits of Religion*—which is to the present age what *The Age of Reason* was to an earlier revolutionary generation—Mr. Sinclair excessively simplifies religious history by reducing almost the whole process to a conspiracy on the part of priestcraft to hoodwink the people and so to fatten its own greedy purse. He must know that the process has not been quite so simple; but, leaving to others to say the things that all will say, he studies "supernaturalism as a source of income and a shield to privilege." Here again his instincts and methods as a melodramatist assert themselves: he warms to the struggle and plays his lash upon his conspiring priests in a mood of mingled duty and delight.

The Profits of Religion and *The Brass Check* belong to a series of treatises on the economic interpretation of culture which will later examine education and literature as these two have examined the church and journalism and which collectively will bear the title *The Dead Hand.* Against the malign domination of the

present by the past Mr. Sinclair directs his principal assault. In the arts he sees the dead hand holding the classics on their thrones and thrusting back new masterpieces as they appear; in religion he sees it clothing the visions of ancient poets in steel creeds and rituals and denying that such visions can ever come to later spirits; in human society he sees it welding the manacles of caste and hardening this or that temporary pattern of life to a perpetual order. As he repeatedly suspects conspiracy where none exists, so he repeatedly suspects deliberate malice where he should perceive stupidity.

Now stupidity, though certainly the cause of more evils than malice can devise, is less employable as a villain: it is not anthropomorphic enough for melodrama. Mr. Sinclair is moral first and then intellectual. Touching upon such a theme as the horrors of venereal disease he feels more than a rational man's contempt for the imbecility of parents who will not instruct their daughters in anything but the sentimental elements of sex; he feels the fury toward them that audiences feel toward villains. It is much the same with his rather absurd novels written to display the follies of fashionable life, *The Metropolis* and *The Moneychangers:* he finds more crime than folly in the extravagant pursuit of pleasure on the part of the few while the many endure hunger and cold, homelessness and joblessness, ignorance and rebellion and premature decay. Though the satirists may smile at the silly few, the ragged philosophers must weep for the miserable many.

Class-consciousness is a great advantage to the writer of exciting fiction, as numerous American novelists have shown—standing ordinarily, however, on the side of the privileged orders. Mr. Sinclair in *The Jungle*, his great success, taking his stand with the unprivileged, with the wretched aliens in the Chicago stockyards, had the advantage that he could represent his characters as actually contending against the conspiracy which always exists when the exploiters of men see the exploited growing restless. What outraged the public was the news, later confirmed by official investigation, that the meat of a large part of the world was being prepared, at great profit to the packers, under conditions abominably unhygienic; what outraged Mr. Sinclair was the spectacle of the lives which the workers in the yards were compelled to lead if they got work—which meant life to them—at all. Thanks to the conspiracy among their masters they could not help themselves; thanks to the weight of the dead hand they could get no help from popular opinion, which saw their plight as something essential to the very structure of society, as Aristotle saw slavery. Mr. Sinclair proclaimed with a ringing voice that their plight was not essential; and he prophesied the revolution with an eloquence which, though the revolution has not come, still warms and lifts the raw material with which he had to deal.

Nothing about him has done more to make him an arresting novelist than his conviction that mankind has not yet reached its peak, as the pessimists think;

and that the current stage of civilization, with all that is unendurable about it, need last no longer than till the moment when mankind determines that it need no longer endure. He speaks as a socialist who has dug up a multitude of economic facts and can present them with appalling force; he speaks as a poet sustained by visions and generous hopes.

How hope has worked in Mr. Sinclair appears with significant emphasis in the contrast between *Manassas* and *100%;* the two books illustrate the range of American naturalism and the progressive disillusion of a generation. *Manassas* is the work of a man filled with epic memories and epic expectations who saw in the Civil War a clash of titanic principles, saw a nation being beaten out on a fearful anvil, saw splendor and heroism rising up from the pits of slaughter. And in spite of his fifteen years spent in discovering the other side of the American picture Mr. Sinclair in *Jimmie Higgins,* the story of a socialist who went to war against the Kaiser, showed traces still of a romantic pulse, settling down, however, toward the end, to a colder beat. It is the colder beat which throbs in *100%*, with a temperature that suggests both ice and fire. Rarely has such irony been maintained in an entire volume as that which traces the evolution of Peter Gudge from sharper to patriot through the foul career of spying and incitement and persecution opened to his kind of talents by the frenzy of noncombatants during the war. To this has that patriotism come which on the red fields of Virginia poured itself out in

unstinting sacrifice; and, though the sacrifice went on in France and Flanders, was it worth while, Mr. Sinclair implicitly inquires, when the conflict, at no matter how great a distance, could breed such vermin as Peter Gudge? Explicitly he does not answer his question: his art has gone, at least for the moment, beyond avowed argument, merely marshaling the evidence with ironic skill and dispensing with the chorus. *100%* is a document which honest Americans must remember and point out when orators exclaim, in the accents of official idealism, over the great days and deeds of the great war.

The road for Mr. Sinclair to travel is the road of irony and documentation, both of which will hold him back from ineffectual rages and thereby serve to enlarge his influence. Such genius for controversy as his may be neither expected nor advised to look for quieter paths; it feels, with Bernard Shaw, that "if people are rotting and starving in all directions, and nobody else has the heart or brains to make a disturbance about it, the great writers must." It is fair to say, however, that certain readers heartily sympathetic toward Mr. Sinclair observe in him a painful tendency to enjoy scandal for its own sake and to generalize from it to an extent which hurts his cause; observe in him a quite superfluous gusto when it comes to reporting bloody incidents not always contributory to any general design; observe in him a frequent over-use of the shout and the scream. He has himself given an example—*100%*—on which such critical strictures are

based; in that best of his novels as well as best of his arguments he has avoided most of his own defects.

A revolutionary novelist naturally finds it difficult to represent his world with the quiet grasp with which it can be represented by one who, accepting the present frame of life, has studied it curiously, affectionately, until it has left a firm, substantial image in the mind. The revolutionist must see life as constantly whirling and melting under his gaze; he must bring to light many facts which the majority overlook but which it will seem to him like connivance with injustice to leave in hiding; he must go constantly beyond what is to what ought to be. All the more reason, then, why he should be as watchful as the most watchful artist in his choice and use of the modes of his particular art. It requires at least as much art to convert as to give pleasure.

5. Theodore Dreiser

Much concerned about wisdom as Theodore Dreiser is, he almost wholly lacks the dexterous knowingness which has marked the mass of fiction in the age of O. Henry. Not only has Mr. Dreiser never allowed any one else to make up his mind for him regarding the significance and aims and obligations of mankind but he has never made up his mind himself. A large dubitancy colors all his reflections. "All we know is that we cannot know." The only law about which we can be reasonably certain is the law of change. Justice is "an occasional compromise struck in an eternal

battle." Virtue and honesty are "a system of weights and measures, balances struck between man and man."

Prudence no less than philosophy demands, then, that we hold ourselves constantly in readiness to discard our ancient creeds and habits and step valiantly around the corner beyond which reality will have drifted even while we were building our houses on what seemed the primeval and eternal rock. Tides of change rise from deeps below deeps; cosmic winds of change blow upon us from boundless chaos; mountains, in the long geologic seasons, shift and flow like clouds; and the everlasting heavens may some day be shattered by the explosion or pressure of new circumstances. Somewhere in the scheme man stands punily on what may be an Ararat rising out of the abyss or only a promontory of the moment sinking back again; there all his strength is devoted to a dim struggle for survival. How in this flickering universe shall man claim for himself the honors of any important antiquity or any important destiny? What, in this vast accident, does human dignity amount to?

For a philosopher with views so wide it is difficult to be a dramatist or a novelist. If he is consistent the most portentous human tragedy must seem to him only a tiny gasp for breath, the most delightful human comedy only a tiny flutter of joy. Against a background of suns dying on the other side of Aldebaran any mole trodden upon by some casual hoof may appear as significant a personage as an Œdipus or a Lear in his last agony. To be a novelist or dramatist at all

such a cosmic philosopher must contract his vision to the little island we inhabit, must adjust his interest to mortal proportions and concerns, must match his narrative to the scale by which we ordinarily measure our lives. The muddle of elements so often obvious in Mr. Dreiser's work comes from the conflict within him of huge, expansive moods and a conscience working hard to be accurate in its representation of the most honest facts of manners and character.

Granted, he might reasonably argue, that the plight and stature of all mankind are essentially so mean, the novelist need not seriously bother himself with the task of looking about for its heroic figures. Plain stories of plain people are as valuable as any others. Since all larger doctrines and ideals are likely to be false in a precarious world, it is best to stick as close as possible to the individual. When the individual is sincere he has at least some positive attributes; his record may have a genuine significance for others if it is presented with absolute candor. Indeed, we can partially escape from the general meaninglessness of life at large by being or studying individuals who are sincere, and who are therefore the origins and centers of some kind of reality.

That the sincerity which Mr. Dreiser practises differs in some respects from that of any other American novelist, no matter how truthful, must be referred to one special quality of his own temperament. Historically he has his fellows: he belongs with the movement toward naturalism which came to America when

Hamlin Garland and Stephen Crane and Frank Norris, partly as a protest against the bland realism which Howells expounded, were dissenting in their various dialects from the reticences and the romances then current. Personally Mr. Dreiser displays, almost alone among American novelists, the characteristics of what for lack of a better native term we have to call the peasant type—the type to which Gorki belongs and which Tolstoy wanted to belong to.

Enlarged by genius though Mr. Dreiser is; open as he is to all manner of novel sensations and ideas; little as he is bound by the rigor of village habits and prejudices—still he carries wherever he goes the true peasant simplicity of outlook, speaks with the peasant's bald frankness, and suffers a peasant confusion in the face of complexity. How far he sees life on one simple plane may be illustrated by his short story *When the Old Century Was New*, an attempt to reconstruct in fiction the New York of 1801 which shows him, in spite of some deliberate erudition, to be amazingly unable to feel at home in another age than his own. This same simplicity of outlook makes *A Traveler at Forty* so revealing a document, makes the Traveler appear a true Innocent Abroad without the hilarious and shrewd self-sufficiency of a frontiersman of genius like Mark Twain. While it is true that Mr. Dreiser's plain-speaking on a variety of topics euphemized by earlier American realists has about it some look of conscious intention, and is undoubtedly sustained by his literary principles, yet his candor essentially inheres in his

nature: he thinks in blunt terms before he speaks in them. He speaks bluntly even upon the more subtle and intricate themes—finance and sex and art—which interest him above all others.

On the whole he probably succeeds best with finance. The career of Cowperwood in *The Financier* and *The Titan*, a career notoriously based upon that of Charles T. Yerkes, allowed Mr. Dreiser to exercise his virtue of patient industry and to build up a solid monument of fact which, though often dull enough, nevertheless continues generally to convince, at least in respect to Cowperwood's business enterprises. The American financier, after all, has rarely had much subtlety in his make-up. Single-minded, tough-skinned, ruthless, "suggesting a power which invents man for one purpose and no other, as generals, saints, and the like are invented," he shoulders and hurls his bulk through a sea of troubles and carries off his spoils. Such a man as Frank Cowperwood Mr. Dreiser understands. He understands the march of desire to its goal. He seems always to have been curious regarding the large operations of finance, at once stirred on his poetical side by the intoxication of golden dreams, something as Marlowe was in *The Jew of Malta*, and on his cynical side struck by the mechanism of craft and courage and indomitable impulse which the financier employs. Mr. Dreiser writes, it is true, as an outsider; he simplifies the account of Cowperwood's adventures after wealth, touching the record here and there with the naïve hand of a peasant—even though a peasant of genius

—wondering how great riches are actually obtained and guessing somewhat awkwardly at the mystery. And yet these guesses perhaps come nearer to the truth than they might have come were either the typical financier or Mr. Dreiser more subtle. You cannot set a poet to catch a financier and be at all sure of the prize. As it is, this Trilogy of Desire (never completed in the third part which was to show Cowperwood extending his mighty foray into London) is as considerable an epic as American business has yet to show.

Cowperwood's lighter hours are devoted to pursuits almost as polygamous as those of the leader of some four-footed herd. In this respect the novels which celebrate him stand close to the more popular *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, both of them annals of women who fall as easily as Cowperwood's many mistresses into the hand of the conquering male. If Mr. Dreiser refuses to withhold his approbation from the lawless financier, he withholds it even less from the lawless lover. No moralism overlays the biology of these novels. Sex in them is a free-flowing, expanding energy, working resistlessly through all human tissue, knowing in itself neither good nor evil, habitually at war with the rules and taboos which have been devised by mankind to hold its amative impulses within convenient bounds. To the cosmic philosopher what does it matter whether this or that human male mates with this or that human female, or whether the mating endures beyond the passionate moment?

Viewing such matters thus Mr. Dreiser constantly underestimates the forces which in civil society actually do restrain the expansive moods of sex. At least he chooses to represent love almost always in its vagrant hours. For this his favorite situation is in large part responsible: that of a strong man, no longer generously young, loving downward to some plastic, ignorant girl dazzled by his splendor and immediately compliant to his advances. Mr. Dreiser is obsessed by the spectacle of middle age renewing itself at the fires of youth—an obsession which has its sentimental no less than its realistic traits. What he most conspicuously leaves out of account is the will and personality of women, whom he sees, or at least represents, with hardly any exceptions as mere fools of love, mere wax to the wooer, who have no separate identities till some lover shapes them. To something like this simplicity the rôle of women in love is reduced by those Boccaccian fabulists who adorn the village taproom and the corner grocery.

Mr. Dreiser is reported to consider *The 'Genius,'* a massive, muddy, powerful narrative, his greatest novel, though as a matter of fact it cannot be compared with *Sister Carrie* for insight or accuracy or charm. His partiality may perhaps be ascribed to his strong inclination toward the life of art, through which his 'Genius' moves, half hero and half picaro. Witla remains mediocre enough in all but his sexual unscrupulousness, but he is impelled by a driving force more or less like those forces which impel Cowperwood. The

will to wealth, the will to love, the will to art—Mr. Dreiser conceives them all as blind energies with no goal except self-realization. So conceiving them he tends to see them as less conditioned than they ordinarily are in their earthly progress by the resistance of statute and habit. Particularly is this true of his representation of the careers of artists. Carrie becomes a noted actress in a few short weeks; Witla almost as rapidly becomes a noted illustrator; other minor characters here and there in the novels are said to have prodigious power without exhibiting it. Hardly ever does there appear any delicate, convincing analysis of the mysterious behavior of true genius. Mr. Dreiser's artists are hardly persons at all; they are creatures driven, and the wonder lies primarily in the impelling energy. The cosmic philosopher in him sees the beginning and the end of the artistic process better than the novelist in him sees its methods. And the peasant in him, though it knows the world of art as vivid and beautiful and though it has investigated that world at first hand, still leads him to report it in terms often quaint, melodramatic, invincibly rural. Witness the hundreds of times he calls things "artistic."

Two of his latest books indicate the range of his gifts and his excellences. In *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub*, which he calls A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life, he undertook to expound his general philosophy and produced the most negligible of all his works. He has no faculty for sustained argument. Like Byron, as soon as he begins to reason he is less

than half himself. In *Twelve Men*, on the other hand, he displays the qualities by virtue of which he attracts and deserves a serious attention. Rarely generalizing, he portrays a dozen actual persons he has known, all his honesty brought to the task of making his account fit the reality exactly, and all his large tolerance exercised to present the truth without malice or excuses. Here lies the field of his finest victories, here and in those adjacent tracts of other books which are nearest this simple method: his representation of old Gerhardt and of Aaron Berchansky in *The Hand of the Potter;* numerous sketches of character in that broad pageant *A Hoosier Holiday;* the tenderly conceived record of Caroline Meeber, wispy and witless as she often is; the masterly study of Hurstwood's deterioration in *Sister Carrie*—this last the peak among all Mr. Dreiser's successes.

Not the incurable awkwardness of his style nor his occasional merciless verbosity nor his too frequent interposition of crude argument can destroy the effect which he produces at his best—that of an eminent spirit brooding over a world which in spite of many condemnations he deeply, somberly loves. Something peasant-like in his genius may blind him a little to the finer shades of character and set him astray in his reports of cultivated society. His conscience about telling the plain truth may suffer at times from a dogmatic tolerance which refuses to draw lines between good and evil or between beautiful and ugly or between wise and foolish. But he gains, on the whole, as much as he loses

by the magnitude of his cosmic philosophizing. These puny souls over which he broods, with so little dignity in themselves, take on a dignity from his contemplation of them. Small as they are, he has come to them from long flights, and has brought back a lifted vision which enriches his drab narratives. Something spacious, something now lurid now luminous, surrounds them. From somewhere sound accents of an authority not sufficiently explained by the mere accuracy of his versions of life. Though it may indeed be difficult for a thinker of the widest views to contract himself to the dimensions needed for naturalistic art, and though he may often fail when he attempts it, when he does succeed he has the opportunity, which the mere worldling lacks, of ennobling his art with some of the great light of the poets.

CHAPTER III

ART

1. Booth Tarkington

Booth Tarkington is the glass of adolescence and the mold of Indiana. The hero of his earliest novel, Harkless in *The Gentleman from Indiana*, drifts through that narrative with a melancholy stride because he has been seven long years out of college and has not yet set the prairie on fire. But Mr. Tarkington, at the time of writing distant from Princeton by about the same number of years and also not yet famous, could not put up with failure in a hero. So Harkless appears as a mine of latent splendors. Carlow County idolizes him, evil-doers hate him, grateful old men worship him, devoted young men shadow his unsuspecting steps at night in order to protect him from the villains of Six-Cross-Roads, sweet girls adore him, fortune saves him from dire adventures, and in the end his fellow-voters choose him to represent their innumerable virtues in the Congress of their country without his even dreaming what affectionate game they are at. This from the creator of Penrod, who at the comical age of twelve so often lays large plans for proving to the heedless world that he, too, has been a

hero all along! In somewhat happier hours Mr. Tarkington wrote *Monsieur Beaucaire*, that dainty romantic episode in the life of Prince Louis-Philippe de Valois, who masquerades as a barber and then as a gambler at Bath, is misjudged on the evidence of his own disguises, just escapes catastrophe, and in the end gracefully forgives the gentlemen and ladies who have been wrong, parting with an exquisite gesture from Lady Mary Carlisle, the beauty of Bath, who loves him but who for a few fatal days had doubted. This from the creator of William Sylvanus Baxter, who at the preposterous age of seventeen imagines himself another Sydney Carton and after a silent, agonizing, condescending farewell goes out to the imaginary tumbril!

Just such postures and phantasms of adolescence lie behind all Mr. Tarkington's more serious plots—and not merely those earlier ones which he constructed a score of years ago when the mode in fiction was historical and rococo. Van Revel in *The Two Van Revels*, convinced and passionate abolitionist, nevertheless becomes as hungry as any fire-eater of them all the moment Polk moves for war on Mexico, though to Van Revel the war is an evil madness. In *The Conquest of Canaan* Louden plays Prince Hal among the lowest his town affords, only to mount with a rush to the mayoralty when he is ready. *The Guest of Quesnay* takes a hero who is soiled with every vileness, smashes his head in an automobile accident, and thus transforms him into that glorious kind of creature known as a

"Greek god"—beautiful and innocent beyond belief or endurance. *The Turmoil* is really not much more veracious, with its ugly duckling, Bibbs Sheridan, who has ideas, loves beauty, and writes verse, but who after years of futile dreaming becomes a master of capital almost overnight. Even *The Magnificent Ambersons*, with its wealth of admirable satire, does not satirize its own conclusion but rounds out its narrative with a hasty regeneration. And what can a critic say of such blatant nonsense as arises from the frenzy of propaganda in *Ramsey Milholland?*

Perhaps it is truer to call Mr. Tarkington's plots sophomoric than to call them adolescent. Indeed, the mark of the undergraduate almost covers them, especially of the undergraduate as he fondly imagines himself in his callow days and as he is foolishly instructed to regard himself by the more vinous and more hilarious of the old graduates who annually come back to a college to offer themselves—though this is not their conscious purpose—as an object lesson in the loud triviality peculiar and traditional to such hours of reunion. Adolescence, however, when left to itself, has other and very different hours which Mr. Tarkington shows almost no signs of comprehending.

The author of *Penrod*, of *Penrod and Sam*, and of *Seventeen* passes for an expert in youth; rarely has so persistent a reputation been so insecurely founded. What all these books primarily recall is the winks that adults exchange over the heads of children who are minding their own business, as the adults are not; the

winks, moreover, of adults who have forgotten the inner concerns of adolescence and now observe only its surface awkwardnesses. Real adolescence, like any other age of man, has its own passions, its own poetry, its own tragedies and felicities; the adolescence of Mr. Tarkington's tales is almost nothing but farce—staged for outsiders. Not one of the characters is an individual; they are all little monsters—amusing monsters, it is true—dressed up to display the stock ambitions and the stock resentments and the stock affectations and the stock perturbations of the heart which attend the middle teens. The pranks of Penrod Schofield are merely those of Tom Sawyer repeated in another town, without the touches of poetry or of the informing imagination lent by Mark Twain. The sighs of "Silly Bill" Baxter—at first diverting, it is also true—are exorbitantly multiplied till reality drops out of the semblance. Calf-love does not always remain a joke merely because there are mature spectators to stand by nudging one another and roaring at the discomfort which love causes its least experienced victims. Those knowing asides which accompany these juvenile records have been mistaken too often for shrewd, even for profound, analyses of human nature. Actually they are only knowing, as sophomores are knowing with respect to their juniors by a few years. In contemporary American fiction Mr. Tarkington is the perennial sophomore.

If he may be said never to have outgrown Purdue and Princeton, so also may he be said never to have out-

grown Indiana. In any larger sense, of course, he has not needed to. A novelist does not require a universe in which to find the universe, which lies folded, for the sufficiently perceptive eye, in any village. Thoreau and Emerson found it in Concord; Thomas Hardy in Wessex has watched the world move by without himself moving. But Mr. Tarkington has toward his native state the conscious attitude of the booster. Smile as he may at the too emphatic patriotism of this or that of her sons, he himself nevertheless expands under a similar stimulus. The impulse of Harkless to clasp all Carlow County to his broad breast obviously sprang from a mood which Mr. Tarkington himself had felt. And that impulse of that first novel has been repeated again and again in the later characters. *In the Arena*, fruit of Mr. Tarkington's term in the Indiana legislature, is a study in complacency. Setting out to take the world of politics as he finds it, he comes perilously near to ending on the note of approval for it as it stands—as good, on the whole, as any possible world. His satire, at least, is on the side of the established order. A certain soundness and rightness of feeling, a natural hearty democratic instinct, which appears in the novels, must not be allowed to mislead the analyst of his art. More than once, to his credit, he satirically recurs to the spectacle of those young Indianians who come back from their travels with a secret condescension, as did George Amberson Minafer: "His politeness was of a kind which democratic people found hard to bear. In a word, M. le Duc had returned from the gay life of

the capital to show himself for a week among the loyal peasants belonging to the old chateau, and their quaint habits and costumes afforded him a mild amusement." Such passages, however, may be matched with irritating dozens in which Mr. Tarkington swallows Indiana whole.

That may have been an easier task than to perform a similar feat with the state to the east of Indiana, which has always been a sort of halfway house between East and West; or with that to the north, with its many alien mixtures; or with that to the south, the picturesque, diversified colony of Virginia; or with that to the west, which, thanks in large part to Chicago, is packed with savagery and genius. Indiana, at any rate till very recently, has had an indigenous population, not too daring or nomadic; it has been both prosperous and folksy, the apt home of pastorals, the agreeable habitat of a sentimental folk-poet like Riley, the natural begetter of a canny fabulist like George Ade. It has a tradition of realism in fiction, but that tradition descends from *The Hoosier School-Master* and it includes a full confidence in the folk and in the rural virtues—very different from that of E. W. Howe or Hamlin Garland or Edgar Lee Masters in states a little further outside the warm, cozy circle of the Hoosiers. Indiana has a tradition of romance, too. Did not Indianapolis publish *When Knighthood Was in Flower* and *Alice of Old Vincennes?* They are of the same vintage as *Monsieur Beaucaire.* And both romance and realism in Indiana have traditionally worn the same

smooth surfaces, the same simple—not to say silly—faith in things-at-large: God's in His Indiana; all's right with the world. George Ade, being a satirist of genius, has stood out of all this; Theodore Dreiser, Indianian by birth but hopelessly a rebel, has stood out against it; but Booth Tarkington, trying to be Hoosier of Hoosiers, has given himself up to the romantic and sentimental elements of the Indiana literary tradition.

To practise an art which is genuinely characteristic of some section of the folk anywhere is to do what may be important and is sure to be interesting. But Mr. Tarkington no more displays the naïveté of a true folk-novelist than he displays the serene vision that can lift a novelist above the accidents of his particular time and place. This Indianian constantly appears, by his allusions, to be a citizen of the world. He knows Europe; he knows New York. Again and again, particularly in the superb opening chapters of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, he rises above the local prejudices of his special parish and observes with a finely critical eye. But whenever he comes to a crisis in the building of a plot or in the truthful representation of a character he sags down to the level of Indiana sentimentality. George Minafer departs from the Hoosier average by being a snob; time—and Mr. Tarkington's plot—drags the cub back to normality. Bibbs Sheridan departs from the Hoosier average by being a poet; time—and Mr. Tarkington's plot—drags the cub back to normality. Both processes are the same. Perhaps Mr.

Tarkington would not deliberately say that snobbery and poetry are equivalent offenses, but he does not particularly distinguish. Sympathize as he may with these two aberrant youths, he knows no other solution than in the end to reduce them to the ranks. He accepts, that is, the casual Hoosier valuation, not with pity because so many of the creative hopes of youth come to naught or with regret that the flock in the end so frequently prevails over individual talent, but with a sort of exultant hurrah at seeing all the wandering sheep brought back in the last chapter and tucked safely away in the good old Hoosier fold.

Viewed critically this attitude of Mr. Tarkington's is of course not even a compliment to Indiana, any more than it is a compliment to women to take always the high chivalrous tone toward them, as if they were flawless creatures; any more than it is a compliment to the poor to assume that they are all virtuous or to the rich to assume that they are all malefactors of a tyrannical disposition. If Indiana plays microcosm to Mr. Tarkington's art, he owes it to his state to find more there than he has found—or has cared to set down; he owes it to his state now and then to quarrel with the dominant majority, for majorities occasionally go wrong, as well as men; he owes it to his state to give up his method of starting his narrative himself and then calling in popular sentimentalism to advise him how to bring it to an end.

According to all the codes of the more serious kinds of fiction, the unwillingness—or the inability—to con-

duct a plot to its legitimate ending implies some weakness in the artistic character; and this weakness has been Mr. Tarkington's principal defect. Nor does it in any way appear that he excuses himself by citing the immemorial license of the romancer. Mr. Tarkington apparently believes in his own conclusions. Now this causes the more regret for the reason that he has what is next best to character in a novelist—that is, knack. He has the knack of romance when he wants to employ it: a light, allusive manner; a sufficient acquaintance with certain charming historical epochs and the "properties" thereto pertaining—frills, ruffs, rapiers, insinuation; a considerable expertness in the ways of the "world"; gay colors, swift moods, the note of tender elegy. He has also the knack of satire, which he employs more frequently than romance. With what a rapid, joyous, accurate eye he has surveyed the processes of culture in "the Midland town"! How quickly he catches the first gesture of affectation and how deftly he sets it forth, entertained and entertaining! From the chuckling exordium of *The Magnificent Ambersons* it is but a step to *The Age of Innocence* and *Main Street*. Little reflective as he has allowed himself to be, he has by shrewd observation alone succeeded in writing not a few chapters which have texture, substance, "thickness." He has movement, he has energy, he has invention, he has good temper, he has the leisure to write as well as he can if he wishes to. And, unlike those dozens of living American writers who once each wrote one good book and then lapsed into

dull oblivion or duller repetition, he has traveled a long way from the methods of his greener days.

Why then does he continue to trifle with his threadbare adolescents, as if he were afraid to write candidly about his coevals? Why does he drift with the sentimental tide and make propaganda for provincial complacency? He must know better. He can do better.

February 1921.

Postscript.—He has done better. Almost as if to prove a somewhat somber critic in the wrong and to show that newer novelists have no monopoly of the new style of seriousness, Mr. Tarkington has in *Alice Adams* held himself veracious to the end and has produced a genuinely significant book. Alice is, indeed, less strictly a tragic figure than she appears to be. Desire, in any of the deeper senses, she shows no signs of feeling; what she loves in Russell is but incidentally himself and actually his assured position and his assured prosperity. So considered, her machinations to enchant and hold him have a comic aspect; one touch more of exaggeration and she would pass over to join those sorry ladies of the world of farce who take a larger visible hand in wooing than human customs happen to approve. But Mr. Tarkington withholds that one touch more of exaggeration. He understands that Alice's instinct to win a husband is an instinct as powerful as any that she has and is all that she has been taught by her society to have. In his handling she becomes important; her struggle, without the aid

of guardian dowager or beguiling dot, becomes increasingly pathetic as the narrative advances; and her eventual failure, though signalized merely by her resolution to desert the inhospitable circles of privilege for the wider universe of work, carries with it the sting of tragedy.

Mr. Tarkington might have gone further than he has behind the bourgeois assumptions which his story takes for granted, but he has probably been wiser not to. Sticking to familiar territory, he writes with the confident touch of a man unconfused by speculation. His style is still swift, still easy, still flexible, still accurate in its conformity to the vernacular. He attempts no sentimental detours and permits himself no popular superfluities. He has retained all his tried qualities of observation and dexterity while admitting to his work the element of a sterner conscience than it has heretofore betrayed. With the honesty of his conclusion goes the mingling of mirth and sadness in *Alice Adams* as another trait of its superiority. The manners of the young which have always seemed so amusing to Mr. Tarkington and which he has kept on watching and laughing at as his principal material, now practically for the first time have evoked from him a considerate sense of the pathos of youth. It strengthens the pathos of Alice's fate that the comedy holds out so well; it enlarges the comedy of it that its pathos is so essential to the action. Even the most comic things have their tears.

August 1921.

2. Edith Wharton

At the outset of the twentieth century O. Henry, in a mood of reaction from current snobbism, discovered what he called the Four Million; and during the same years, in a mood not wholly different, Edith Wharton rediscovered what she would never have called the Four Hundred. Or rather she made known to the considerable public which peeps at fashionable New York through the obliging windows of fiction that that world was not so simple in its magnificence as the inquisitive, but uninstructed, had been led to believe. Behind the splendors reputed to characterize the great, she testified on almost every page of her books, lay certain arcana which if much duller were also much more desirable. Those splendors were merely as noisy brass to the finer metal of the authentic inner circles. These were very small, and they suggested an American aristocracy rather less than they suggested the aborigines of their native continent.

Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country* described Washington Square as the "Reservation," and prophesied that "before long its inhabitants would be exhibited at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries." Mrs. Wharton has exhibited them in the exercise of industries not precisely primitive, and yet aboriginal enough, very largely concerned in turning shapely shoulders to the hosts of Americans anxious and determined to invade their ancient reservations. As the success of the

women in keeping new aspirants out of drawing-room and country house has always been greater than the success of the men in keeping them out of Wall Street, the aboriginal aristocracy in Mrs. Wharton's novels transacts its affairs for the most part in drawing-rooms and country houses. There, however, to judge by *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*, the life of the inhabitants, far from being a continuous revel as represented by the popular novelists, is marked by nothing so much as an uncompromising decorum.

Take the case of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. She goes to pieces on the rocks of that decorum, though she has every advantage of birth except a fortune, and knows the rules of the game perfectly. But she cannot follow them with the impeccable equilibrium which is needful; she has the Aristotelian hero's fatal defect of a single weakness. In that golden game not to go forward is to fall behind. Lily Bart hesitates, oscillates, and is lost. Having left her appointed course, she finds on trying to return to her former society that it is little less impermeable to her than she has seen rank outsiders find it. Then there is Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*, who, marrying and divorcing with the happy insensibility of the animals that mate for a season only, undertakes to force her brilliant, barren beauty into the centers of the elect. Such beauty as hers can purchase much, thanks to the desires of men, and Undine, thanks to her own blindness as regards all delicate disapproval, comes within sight

of her goal. But in the end she fails. The custom of *her* country—Apex City and the easy-going West—is not the decorum of New York reinforced by European examples. Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* neither lose nor seek an established position within the social mandarinate of Manhattan as constituted in the seventies of the last century. They belong there and there they remain. But at what sacrifices of personal happiness and spontaneous action! They walk through their little drama with the unadventurous stride of puppets; they observe dozens of taboos with a respect allied to terror. It is true that they appear to have been the victims of the provincial "innocence" of their generation, but the newer generation in New York is not entirely acquitted of a certain complicity in the formalism of its past.

From the first Mrs. Wharton's power has lain in the ability to reproduce in fiction the circumstances of a compact community in a way that illustrates the various oppressions which such communities put upon individual vagaries, whether viewed as sin, or ignorance, or folly, or merely as social impossibility. She has, of course, studied other communities than New York: the priest-ridden Italy of the eighteenth century in *The Valley of Decision;* modern France in *Madame de Treymes* and *The Reef;* provincial New England in *The Fruit of the Tree.* What characterizes the New York novels characterizes these others as well: a sense of human beings living in such intimate solidarity that no one of them may vary from the customary path

without in some fashion breaking the pattern and inviting some sort of disaster.

Novels written out of this conception of existence fall ordinarily into partizanship, either on the side of the individual who leaves his herd or on the side of the herd which runs him down or shuts him out for good. Mrs. Wharton has always been singularly unpartizan, as if she recognized it as no duty of hers to do more for the herd or its members than to play over the spectacle of their clashes the long, cold light of her magnificent irony. At the same time, however, her attitude toward New York society, her most frequent theme, has slightly changed. *The House of Mirth*, published in 1905, glows with certain of the colors of the grand style. These appear hardly at all in *The Age of Innocence*, published in 1920, as if Mrs. Wharton's feeling for ceremony had diminished, as if the grand style no longer found her so susceptible as formerly. Possibly her advance in satire may arise from nothing more significant than her retreat into the past for a subject. Nevertheless, one step forward could make her an invaluable satirist of the current hour.

Among Mrs. Wharton's novels are two—*Ethan Frome* and *Summer*—which unfold the tragedy of circumstances apparently as different as possible from those chronicled in the New York novels. Her fashionable New York and her rural New England, however, have something in common. In the desolate communities which witness the agonies of Ethan Frome and Charity Royall not only is there a stubborn village

decorum but there are also the bitter compulsions of a helpless poverty which binds feet and wings as the most ruthless decorum cannot bind them, and which dulls all the hues of life to an unendurable dinginess. As a member of the class which spends prosperous vacations on the old soil of the Puritans Mrs. Wharton has surveyed the cramped lives of the native remnant with a pity springing from her knowledge of all the freedom and beauty and pleasure which they miss. She consequently brings into her narrative an outlook not to be found in any of the novelists who write of rural New England out of the erudition which comes of more intimate acquaintanceship. Without filing down her characters into types she contrives to lift them into universal figures of aspiration or disappointment.

In *Ethan Frome*, losing from her clear voice for a moment the note of satire, she reaches her highest point of tragic passion. In the bleak life of Ethan Frome on his bleak hillside there blooms an exquisite love which during a few hours of rapture promises to transform his fate; but poverty clutches him, drives him to attempt suicide with the woman he loves, and then condemns him to one of the most appalling expiations in fiction—to a slavery in comparison with which his former life was almost freedom. Not since Hawthorne has a novelist built on the New England soil a tragedy of such elevation of mood as this. Freed from the bondage of local color, that myopic muse, Mrs. Wharton here handles her material not so much like a quarryman finding curious stones and calling out about

them as like a sculptor setting up his finished work on a commanding hill.

It has regularly been by her novels that Mrs. Wharton has attracted the most attention, and yet her short stories are of a quite comparable excellence. About fifty of them altogether, they show her swift, ironical intelligence flashing its light into numerous corners of human life not large enough to warrant prolonged reports. She can go as far afield as to the ascetic ecstasies and agonies of medieval religion, in *The Hermit and the Wild Woman;* or as to the horrible revenge of Duke Ercole of Vicenza, in *The Duchess at Prayer;* or as to the murder and witchcraft of seventeenth-century Brittany, in *Kerfol. Kerfol*, *Afterward*, and *The Lady's Maid's Bell* are as good ghost stories as any written in many years. *Bunner Sisters*, an observant, tender narrative, concerns itself with the declinging fortunes of two shopkeepers of Stuyvesant Square in New York's age of innocence.

For the most part, however, the locality and temper of Mrs. Wharton's briefer stories are not so remote as these from the center of her particular world, wherein subtle and sophisticated people stray in the crucial mazes of art or learning or love. Her artists and scholars are likely to be shown at some moment in which a passionate ideal is in conflict with a lower instinct toward profit or reputation, as when in *The Descent of Man* an eminent scientist turns his feet ruinously into the wide green descent to "popular" science, or as when in *The Verdict* a fashionable painter

of talent encounters the work of an obscure genius and gives up his own career in the knowledge that at best he can never do but third-rate work. Some such stress of conflict marks almost all Mrs. Wharton's stories of love, which make up the overwhelming majority of her work. Love with her in but few cases runs the smooth course coincident with flawless matrimony. It cuts violently across the boundaries drawn by marriages of convenience, and it suffers tragic changes in the objects of its desire.

What opportunity has a free, wilful passion in the tight world Mrs. Wharton prefers to represent? Either its behavior must be furtive and hypocritical or else it must incur social disaster. Here again Mrs. Wharton will not be partizan. If in one story—such as *The Long Run*—she seems to imply that there is no ignominy like that of failing love when it comes, yet in another—such as *Souls Belated*—she sets forth the costs and the entanglements that ensue when individuals take love into their own hands and defy society. Not love for itself but love as the most frequent and most personal of all the passions which bring the community into clashes with its members—this is the subject of Mrs. Wharton's curiosity and study. Her only positive conclusions about it, as reflected in her stories, seem to be that love cuts deepest in the deepest natures and yet that no one is quite so shallow as to love and recover from it without a scar. Divorce, according to her representations, can never be quite complete; one of her most amusing stories, *The Other Two,*

recounts how the third husband of a woman whose first two husbands are still living gradually resolves her into her true constituency and finds nothing there but what one husband after another has made of her.

In stories like this Mrs. Wharton occasionally leaves the restraint of her ordinary manner to wear the keener colors of the satirist. *Xingu*, for instance, with its famous opening sentence—"Mrs. Ballinger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone"—has the flash and glitter, and the agreeable artificiality, of polite comedy. Undine Spragg and the many futile women whom Mrs. Wharton enjoys ridiculing more than she gives evidence of enjoying anything else belong nearly as much to the menagerie of the satirist as to the novelist's gallery. It is only in these moments of satire that Mrs. Wharton reveals much about her disposition: her impatience with stupidity and affectation and muddy confusion of mind and purpose; her dislike of dinginess; her toleration of arrogance when it is high-bred. Such qualities do not help her, for all her spare, clean movement, to achieve the march or rush of narrative; such qualities, for all her satiric pungency, do not bring her into sympathy with the sturdy or burly or homely, or with the broader aspects of comedy. Lucidity, detachment, irony—these never desert her (though she wrote with the hysterical pen that hundreds used during the war). So great is her self-possession that she holds criticism at arm's length, somewhat as her chosen circles hold the barbarians. If she had a little less of this pride of

dignity she might perhaps avoid her tendency to assign to decorum a larger power than it actually exercises, even in the societies about which she writes. Decorum, after all, is binding chiefly upon those who accept it without question but not upon passionate or logical rebels, who are always shattering it with some touch of violence or neglect; neither does it bind those who stand too securely to be shaken. For this reason the coils of circumstance and the pitfalls of inevitability with which Mrs. Wharton besets the careers of her characters are in part an illusion deftly employed for the sake of artistic effect. She multiplies them as romancers multiply adventures.

The illusion of reality in her work, however, almost never fails her, so alertly is her mind on the lookout to avoid vulgar or shoddy romantic elements. Compared to Henry James, her principal master in fiction, whom she resembles in respect to subjects and attitude, she lacks exuberance and richness of texture, but she has more intelligence than he. Compared to Jane Austen, the novelist among Anglo-Saxon women whom Mrs. Wharton most resembles, particularly as regards satire and decorum, she is the more impassioned of the two. It may seem at first thought a little strange to compare the vivid novels of the author of *The House of Mirth* with the mouse-colored narratives of the author of *Pride and Prejudice*, for the twentieth century has added to all fiction many overtones not heard in the eighteenth. But of no other woman writer since Jane Austen can it be said quite so truthfully as of Mrs.

Wharton that her natural, instinctive habitat is a true tower of irony.

3. James Branch Cabell

Although most novelists with any historical or scholarly hankerings are satisfied to invent here a scene and there a plot and elsewhere an authority, James Branch Cabell has invented a whole province for his imagination to dwell in. He calls it Poictesme and sets it on the map of medieval Europe, but it has no more unity of time and place than has the multitudinous land of *The Faerie Queene.* Around the reigns of Dom Manuel, Count and Redeemer of Poictesme, epic hero of *Figures of Earth,* father of the heroine in *The Soul of Melicent* (later renamed *Domnei*), father of that Dorothy la Desirée whom Jurgen loved (with some other women), father also of that Count Emmerich who succeeded Manuel as ruler at Bellegarde and Storisende —around the reigns of Manuel and Emmerich the various sagas of Mr. Cabell principally revolve. Scandinavia, however, conveniently impinges upon their province, with Constantinople and Barbary, Massilia, Aquitaine, Navarre, Portugal, Rome, England, Paris, Alexandria, Arcadia, Olympus, Asgard, and the Jerusalems Old and New. As many ages of history likewise converge upon Poictesme in its ostensible thirteenth or fourteenth century, from the most mythological times only a little this side of Creation to the most contemporary America of Felix Kennaston who lives at comfort-

able Lichfield with two motors and with money in four banks but in his mind habitually bridges the gap by imagined excursions into Poictesme and the domains adjacent.

Nothing but remarkable erudition in the antiquities as Cockaigne and Faery could possibly suffice for such adventures as Mr. Cabell's, and he has very remarkable erudition in all that concerns the regions which delight him. And where no authorities exist he merrily invents them, as in the case of his Nicolas of Caen, poet of Normandy, whose tales *Dizain des Reines* are said to furnish the source for the ten stories collected in *Chivalry*, and whose largely lost masterpiece *Le Roman de Lusignan* serves as the basis for *Domnei*. One British critic and rival of Mr. Cabell has lately fretted over the unblushing anachronisms and confused geography of this parti-colored world. For less dull-witted scholars these are the very cream of the Cabellian jest.

The cream but not the substance, for Mr. Cabell has a profound creed of comedy rooted in that romance which is his regular habit. Romance, indeed, first exercised his imagination, in the early years of the century when in many minds he was associated with the decorative Howard Pyle and allowed his pen to move at the languid gait then characteristic of a dozen inferior romancers. Only gradually did his texture grow firmer, his tapestry richer; only gradually did his gaiety strengthen into irony. Although that irony was the progenitor of the comic spirit which now in his ma-

turity dominates him, it has never shaken off the romantic elements which originally nourished it. Rather, romance and irony have grown up in his work side by side. His Poictesme is no less beautiful for having come to be a country of disillusion; nor has his increasing sense of the futility of desire robbed him of his old sense that desire is a glory while it lasts.

He allows John Charteris in *Beyond Life*—for the most part Mr. Cabell's mouthpiece—to set forth the doctrine that romance is the real demiurge, "the first and loveliest daughter of human vanity," whereby mankind is duped—and exalted. "No one on the preferable side of Bedlam wishes to be reminded of what we are in actuality, even were it possible, by any disastrous miracle, ever to dispel the mist which romance has evoked about all human doings." Therefore romance has created the "dynamic illusions" of chivalry and love and common sense and religion and art and patriotism and optimism, and therein "the ape reft of his tail and grown rusty at climbing" has clothed himself so long that as he beholds himself in the delusive mirrors he has for centuries held up to nature he believes he is somehow of cosmic importance. Poor and naked as this aspiring ape must seem to the eye of reason, asks Mr. Cabell, is there not something magnificent about his imaginings? Does the course of human life not singularly resemble the dance of puppets in the hands of a Supreme Romancer? How, then, may any one declare that romance has become antiquated or can ever

cease to be indispensable to mortal character and mortal interest?

The difference between Mr. Cabell and the popular romancers who in all ages clutter the scene and for whom he has nothing but amused contempt is that they are unconscious dupes of the demiurge whereas he, aware of its ways and its devices, employs it almost as if it were some hippogriff bridled by him in Elysian pastures and respectfully entertained in a snug Virginian stable. His attitude toward romance suggests a cheerful despair: he despairs of ever finding anything truer than romance and so contents himself with Poictesme and its tributaries. The favorite themes of romance being relatively few, he has not troubled greatly to increase them; war and love in the main he finds enough.

Besides these, however, he has always been deeply occupied with one other theme—the plight of the poet in the world. That sturdy bruiser Dom Manuel, for instance, is at heart a poet who molds figures out of clay as his strongest passion, although the world, according to its custom, conspires against his instinct by interrupting him with love and war and business, and in the end hustles him away before he has had time to make anything more lovely or lasting than a reputation as a hero. In the amazing fantasy *The Cream of the Jest* Mr. Cabell has embodied the visions of the romancer Felix Kennaston so substantially that Kennaston's diurnal walks in Lichfield seem hardly as real as those

nightly ventures which under the guise of Horvendile he makes into the glowing land he has created. Nor are the two universes separated by any tight wall which the fancy must leap over: they flow with exquisite caprice one into another, as indeed they always do in the consciousness of a poet who, like Kennaston or Mr. Cabell, broods continually over the problem how best to perform his function: "to write perfectly of beautiful happenings."

Of all the fine places in the world where beautiful happenings come together, Mr. Cabell argues, incomparably the richest is in the consciousness of a poet who is also a scholar. There are to be found the precious hoarded memories of some thousands of years: high deeds and burning loves and eloquent words and surpassing tears and laughter. There, consequently, the romancer may well take his stand, distilling bright new dreams out of ancient beauty. And if he adds the heady tonic of an irony springing from a critical intelligence, so much the better. When Mr. Cabell wishes to represent several different epochs in *The Certain Hour* he chooses to tell ten stories of poets—real or imagined—as the persons in whom, by reason of their superior susceptibility, the color of their epochs may be most truthfully discovered; and when he wishes to decant his own wit and wisdom most genuinely the vessel he normally employs is a poet.

If the poets and warriors who make up the list of Mr. Cabell's heroes devote their lives almost wholly to love, it is for the reason that no other emotion interests him

so much or seems to him to furnish so many beautiful happenings about which to write perfectly. Love, like art, is a species of creation, and the moods which attend it, though illusions, are miracles none the less. Of the two aspects of love which especially attract Mr. Cabell he has given the larger share of his attention to the extravagant worship of women("domnei") developed out of chivalry—the worship which began by ascribing to the beloved the qualities of purity and perfection, of beauty and holiness, and ended by practically identifying her with the divine. This supernal folly reaches its apogee in *Domnei*, in the careers of Perion and Melicent who are so uplifted by ineffable desire that their souls ceaselessly reach out to each other though obstacles large as continents intervene. For Perion the most deadly battles are but thornpricks in the quest of Melicent; and such is Melicent's loyalty during the years of her longing that the possession of her most white body by Demetrios of Anatolia leaves her soul immaculate and almost unperturbed. In this tale love is canonized: throned on alabaster above all the vulgar gods it diffuses among its worshipers a crystal radiance in which mortal imperfections perish—or are at least forgotten during certain rapturous hours.

Ordinarily one cynical touch will break such pretty bubbles; but Mr. Cabell, himself a master of cynical touches and shrewdly anticipant of them, protects his invention with the competent armor of irony, and now and then—particularly in the felicitous tenson spoken by Perion and Demetrios concerning the charms of

Melicent—brings mirth and beauty to an amalgam which bids fair to prove classic metal. A much larger share of this mirth appears in *Jurgen*, which narrates with phallic candor the exploits of a middle-aged pawnbroker of Poictesme in pursuit of immortal desire. Of course he does not find it, for the sufficient reason that, as Mr. Cabell understands such matters, the ultimate magic of desire lies in the inaccessibility of the desired; and Jurgen, to whom all women in his amorous Cockaigne are as accessible as bread and butter, after his sly interval of rejuvenation comes back in the end to his wife and his humdrum duty with a definite relief. He may be no more in love with Dame Lisa than with his right hand, and yet both are considerably more necessary to his well-being, he discovers, than a number of more exciting things.

Love in *Jurgen* inclines toward another aspect of the passion which Mr. Cabell has studied somewhat less than the chivalrous—the aspect of gallantry. "I have read," says John Charteris, "that the secret of gallantry is to accept the pleasures of life leisurely, and its inconveniences with a shrug; as well as that, among other requisites, the gallant person will always consider the world with a smile of toleration, and his own doings with a smile of honest amusement, and Heaven with a smile which is not distrustful—being thoroughly persuaded that God is kindlier than the genteel would regard as rational." These are the accents, set to slightly different rhythms, of a Congreve; and if there is anything as remarkable about Mr. Cabell as the fact that

he has represented the chivalrous and the gallant attitudes toward love with nearly equal sympathy, it is the fact that in an era of militant naturalism and of renascent moralism he has blithely adhered to an affection for unconcerned worldliness and has airily played Congreve in the midst of all the clamorous, serious, disquisitive bassoons of the national orchestra.

In *The Cords of Vanity* Robert Townsend goes gathering roses and tasting lips almost as if the second Charles were still the lawful ruler of his obedient province of Virginia; and in *The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck* Rudolph Musgrave, that quaint figure whittled out of chivalry and dressed up in amiable heroics, is plainly contrasted with the glib rogue of genius John Charteris, who, elsewhere in Mr. Cabell's books generally the chorus, here enters the plot and exhibits a sorry gallantry in action. Poictesme, these novels indicate, is not the only country Mr. Cabell knows; he knows also how to feel at home, when he cares to, in the mimic universe of Lichfield and Fairhaven, where gay ribbons perpetually flutter, and where eyes and hands perpetually invite, and where love runs a deft, dainty, fickle course in all weathers.

That Felix Kennaston inhabits Lichfield in the flesh and in the spirit elopes into Poictesme may be taken, after a fashion, as allegory with an autobiographical foundation: *The Cream of the Jest* is, on the whole, the essence of Cabell. The book suggests, moreover, a critical position—which is, that gallantry and Virginia have so far been regrettably sacrificed to chivalry

and Poictesme in the career of Mr. Cabell's imagination. Not only the symmetry expected of that career demands something different; so does its success with the gallantries of Lichfield. In spite of all Mr. Cabell's accumulation of erudite allusions the atmosphere of his Poictesme often turns thin and leaves his characters gasping for vital breath; nor does he entirely restore it by multiplying symbols as he does in *Jurgen* and *Figures of Earth* until the background of his narrative is studded with rich images and piquant chimeras that perplex more than they illuminate—and sometimes bore. These chivalric loves beating their heads against the cold moon are, after all, follies, however supernal; they are as brief as they are bright; in the end even the greedy Jurgen turns back to honest salt from too much sugar.

Now in gallantry as Mr. Cabell conceives and represents it there is always the salt of prudence, of satire, of comedy; and his gifts in this direction are too great to be neglected. The comic spirit, let it be remembered, has led Mr. Cabell from the softness and sweetness which in spots disfigured his earlier romances—such as *The Line of Love* and *Chivalry*—before he recently revised them; it has happily kept in hand the wild wings of his later love stories; now it deserves to have its way unburdened, at least occasionally. While it almost had its way in *Jurgen*, where it behaved like a huge organ bursting into uproarious laughter, it still had to carry the burden of much learning. It would be freer of such delectable plunder could it once

burst into uproar in the midst of Virginia. Mr. Cabell has singled out two very dissimilar poets for particular compliment: Marlowe and Congreve. As regards the still more particular compliment of imitation, however, he has done Congreve rather less than justice.

4. Willa Cather

When Willa Cather dedicated her first novel, *O Pioneers!*, to the memory of Sarah Orne Jewett, she pointed out a link of natural piety binding her to a literary ancestor now rarely credited with descendants so robust. The link holds even yet in respect to the clear outlines and fresh colors and simple devices of Miss Cather's art; in respect to the body and range of her work it never really held. The thin, fine gentility which Miss Jewett celebrates is no further away from the rich vigor of Miss Cather's pioneers than is the kindly sentiment of the older woman from the native passion of the younger. Miss Jewett wrote of the shadows of memorable events. Once upon a time, her stories all remind us, there was an heroic cast to New England. In Miss Jewett's time only the echoes of those Homeric days made any noise in the world—at least for her ears and the ears of most of her literary contemporaries. Unmindful of the roar of industrial New England she kept to the milder regions of her section and wrote elegies upon the epigones.

In Miss Cather's quarter of the country there were still heroes during the days she has written about, still

pioneers. The sod and swamps of her Nebraska prairies defy the hands of labor almost as obstinately as did the stones and forests of old New England. Her Americans, like all the Agamemnons back of Miss Jewett's world, are fresh from Europe, locked in a mortal conflict with nature. If now and then the older among them grow faint at remembering Bohemia or France or Scandinavia, this is not the predominant mood of their communities. They ride powerfully forward on a wave of confident energy, as if human life had more dawns than sunsets in it. For the most part her pioneers are unreflective creatures, driven by some inner force which they do not comprehend: they are, that is perhaps no more than to say, primitive and epic in their dispositions.

Is it by virtue of a literary descent from the New England school that Miss Cather depends so frequently upon women as protagonists? Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!*, Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*, Ántonia Shimerda in *My Ántonia*—around these as girls and women the actions primarily revolve. It is not, however, as other Helens or Gudruns that they affect their universes; they are not the darlings of heroes but heroes themselves. Alexandra drags her dull brothers after her and establishes the family fortunes; Ántonia, less positive and more pathetic, still holds the center of her retired stage by her rich, warm, deep goodness; Thea, a genius in her own right, outgrows her Colorado birthplace and becomes a famous singer with all the fierce

energy of a pioneer who happens to be an instinctive artist rather than an instinctive manager, like Alexandra, or an instinctive mother, like Ántonia. And is it because women are here protagonists that neither wars, as among the ancients, nor machines, as among the moderns, promote the principal activities of the characters? Less the actions than the moods of these novels have the epic air. Narrow as Miss Cather's scene may be, she fills it with a spaciousness and candor of personality that quite transcends the gnarled eccentricity and timid inhibitions of the local colorists. Passion blows through her chosen characters like a free, wholesome, if often devastating wind; it does not, as with Miss Jewett and her contemporaries, lurk in furtive corners or hide itself altogether. And as these passions are most commonly the passions of home-keeping women, they lie nearer to the core of human existence than if they arose out of the complexities of a wider region.

Something more than Miss Cather's own experience first upon the frontier and then among artists and musicians has held her almost entirely to those two worlds as the favored realms of her imagination. In them, rather than in bourgeois conditions, she finds the theme most congenial to her interest and to her powers. That theme is the struggle of some elect individual to outgrow the restrictions laid upon him—or more frequently her—by numbing circumstances. The early, somewhat inconsequential *Alexander's Bridge* touches this theme, though Bartley Alexander, like the bridge

he is building, fails under the strain, largely by reason of a flawed simplicity and a divided energy. Pioneers and artists, in Miss Cather's understanding of their natures, are practically equals in single-mindedness; at least they work much by themselves, contending with definite though ruthless obstacles and looking forward, if they win, to a freedom which cannot be achieved in the routine of crowded communities. To become too much involved, for her characters, is to lose their quality. There is Marie Tovesky, in *O Pioneers!*, whom nothing more preventable than her beauty and gaiety drags into a confused status and so on to catastrophe. Ántonia, tricked into a false relation by her scoundrel lover, and Alexandra, nagged at by her stodgy family because her suitor is poor, suffer temporary eclipses from which only their superb health of character finally extricates them. Thea Kronborg, troubled by the swarming sensations of her first year in Chicago, has to find her true self again in that marvelous desert canyon in Arizona where hot sun and bright, cold water and dim memories of the cliff-dwelling Ancient People detach her from the stupid faces which have haunted and unnerved her.

Miss Cather would not belong to her generation if she did not resent the trespasses which the world regularly commits upon pioneers and artists. For all the superb vitality of her frontier, it faces—and she knows it faces—the degradation of its wild freedom and beauty by clumsy towns, obese vulgarity, the uniform of a monotonous standardization. Her heroic days

endure but a brief period before extinction comes. Then her high-hearted pioneers survive half as curiosities in a new order; and their spirits, transmitted to the artists who are their legitimate successors, take up the old struggle in a new guise. In the short story called *The Sculptor's Funeral* she lifts her voice in swift anger and in *A Gold Slipper* she lowers it to satirical contempt against the dull souls who either misread distinction or crassly overlook it.

At such moments she enlists in the crusade against dulness which has recently succeeded the hereditary crusade of American literature against wickedness. But from too complete an absorption in that transient war she is saved by the same strength which has lifted her above the more trivial concerns of local color. The older school uncritically delighted in all the village singularities it could discover; the newer school no less uncritically condemns and ridicules all the village conventionalities. Miss Cather has seldom swung far either to the right or to the left in this controversy. She has, apparently, few revenges to take upon the communities in which she lived during her expanding youth. An eye bent too relentlessly upon dulness could have found it in Alexandra Bergson, with her slow, unimaginative thrift; or in Ántonia Shimerda, who is a "hired girl" during the days of her tenderest beauty and the hard-worked mother of many children on a distant farm to the end of the story. Miss Cather, almost alone among her peers in this decade, understands that human character for its own sake

has a claim upon human interest, surprisingly irrespective of the moral or intellectual qualities which of course condition and shape it.

"Her secret?" says Harsanyi of Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*. "It is every artist's secret . . . passion. It is an open secret, and perfectly safe. Like heroism, it is inimitable in cheap materials." In these words Miss Cather furnishes an admirable commentary upon the strong yet subtle art which she herself practises. Fiction habitually strives to reproduce passion and heroism and in all but chosen instances falls below the realities because it has not truly comprehended them or because it tries to copy them in cheap materials. It is not Miss Cather's lucid intelligence alone, though that too is indispensable, which has kept her from these ordinary blunders of the novelist: she herself has the energy which enables her to feel passion and the honesty which enables her to reproduce it. Something of the large tolerance which she must have felt in Whitman before she borrowed from him the title of *O Pioneers!* breathes in all her work. Like him she has tasted the savor of abounding health; like him she has exulted in the sense of vast distances, the rapture of the green earth rolling through space, the consciousness of past and future striking hands in the radiant present; like him she enjoys "powerful uneducated persons" both as the means to a higher type and as ends honorable in themselves. At the same time she does not let herself run on in the ungirt dithyrambs of Whitman or into his followers'

glorification of sheer bulk and impetus. Taste and intelligence hold her passion in hand. It is her distinction that she combines the merits of those oddly matched progenitors, Miss Jewett and Walt Whitman: she has the delicate tact to paint what she sees with clean, quiet strokes; and she has the strength to look past casual surfaces to the passionate center of her characters.

The passion of the artist, the heroism of the pioneer —these are the human qualities Miss Cather knows best. Compared with her artists the artists of most of her contemporaries seem imitated in cheap materials. They suffer, they rebel, they gesticulate, they pose, they fail through success, they succeed through failure; but only now and then do they have the breathing, authentic reality of Miss Cather's painters and musicians. Musicians she knows best among artists—perhaps has been most interested in them and has associated most with them because of the heroic vitality which a virtuoso must have to achieve any real eminence. The poet may languish over verses in his garret, the painter or sculptor over work conceived and executed in a shy privacy; but the great singer must be an athlete and an actor, training for months and years for the sake of a few hours of triumph before a throbbing audience. It is, therefore, not upon the revolt of Thea Kronborg from her Colorado village that Miss Cather lays her chief stress but upon the girl's hard, unspeculative, dæmonic integrity. She lifts herself from alien conditions hardly knowing what she

does, almost as a powerful animal shoulders its instinctive way through scratching underbrush to food and water. Thea may be checked and delayed by all sorts of human complications but her deeper nature never loses the sense of its proper direction. Ambition with her is hardly more than the passion of self-preservation in a potent spirit.

That Miss Cather no less truly understands the quieter attributes of heroism is made evident by the career of Ántonia Shimerda—of Miss Cather's heroines the most appealing. Ántonia exhibits the ordinary instincts of self-preservation hardly at all. She is gentle and confiding; service to others is the very breath of her being. Yet so deep and strong is the current of motherhood which runs in her that it extricates her from the level of mediocrity as passion itself might fail to do. Goodness, so often negative and annoying, amounts in her to an heroic effluence which imparts the glory of reality to all it touches. "She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize as universal and true. . . . She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. . . . She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races." It is not easy even to say things so illuminating about a human being; it is all but impossible to create one with such sympathetic art that words like these at the end confirm and interpret an impression already made.

My Ántonia, following *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, holds out a promise for future development that the work of but two or three other established American novelists holds out. Miss Cather's recent volume of short stories *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, striking though it is, represents, it may be hoped, but an interlude in her brilliant progress. Such passion as hers only rests itself in brief tales and satire; then it properly takes wing again to larger regions of the imagination. Vigorous as it is, its further course cannot easily be foreseen; it has not the kind of promise that can be discounted by confident expectations. Her art, however, to judge it by its past career, can be expected to move in the direction of firmer structure and clearer outline. After all she has written but three novels and it is not to be wondered at that they all have about them certain of the graceful angularities of an art not yet complete. *O Pioneers!* contains really two stories; *The Song of the Lark*, though Miss Cather cut away an entire section at the end, does not maintain itself throughout at the full pitch of interest; the introduction to *My Ántonia* is largely superfluous. Having freed herself from the bondage of "plot" as she has freed herself from an inheritance of the softer sentiments, Miss Cather has learned that the ultimate interest of fiction inheres in character. It is a question whether she can ever reach the highest point of which she shows signs of being capable unless she makes up her mind that it is as important to find the precise form for the

representation of a memorable character as it is to find the precise word for the expression of a memorable idea. At present she pleads that if she must sacrifice something she would rather it were form than reality. If she desires sufficiently she can have both.

5. Joseph Hergesheimer

Joseph Hergesheimer employs his creative strategy over the precarious terrain of the decorative arts, some of his work lying on each side of the dim line which separates the most consummate artifice of which the hands of talent are capable from the essential art which springs naturally from the instincts of genius. On the side of artifice, certainly, lie several of the shorter stories in *Gold and Iron* and *The Happy End*, for which, he declares, his grocer is as responsible as any one; and on the side of art, no less certainly, lie at least *Java Head*, in which artifice, though apparent now and then, repeatedly surrenders the field to an art which is admirably authentic, and *Linda Condon*, nearly the most beautiful American novel since Hawthorne and Henry James.

Standing thus in a middle ground between art and artifice Mr. Hergesheimer stands also in a middle ground between the unrelieved realism of the newer school of American fiction and the genteel moralism of the older. "I had been spared," he says with regard to moralism, "the dreary and impertinent duty of improving the world; the whole discharge of my respon-

sibility was contained in the imperative obligation to see with relative truth, to put down the colors and scents and emotions of existence." And with regard to realism: "If I could put on paper an apple tree rosy with blossom, someone else might discuss the economy of the apples."

Mr. Hergesheimer does not, of course, merely blunder into beauty; his methods are far from being accidental; by deliberate aims and principles he holds himself close to the regions of the decorative. He likes the rococo and the Victorian, ornament without any obvious utility, grace without any busy function. He refuses to feel confident that the passing of elegant privilege need be a benefit: "A maze of clipped box, old emerald sod, represented a timeless striving for superiority, for, at least, the illusion of triumph over the littorals of slime; and their destruction in waves of hysteria, sentimentality, and envy was immeasurably disastrous." For himself he clings sturdily, ardently, to loveliness wherever he finds it—preferring, however, its richer, its elaborated forms.

To borrow an antithesis remarked by a brilliant critic in the work of Amy Lowell, Mr. Hergesheimer seems at times as much concerned with the stuffs as with the stuff of life. His landscapes, his interiors, his costumes he sets forth with a profusion of exquisite details which gives his texture the semblance of brocade —always gorgeous but now and then a little stiff with its splendors of silk and gold. An admitted personal inclination to "the extremes of luxury" struggles in

Mr. Hergesheimer with an artistic passion for "words as disarmingly simple as the leaves of spring—as simple and as lovely in pure color—about the common experience of life and death"; and more than anything else this conflict explains the presence in all but his finest work of occasional heavy elements which weight it down and the presence in his most popular narratives of a constant lift of beauty and lucidity which will not let them sag into the average.

One comes tolerably close to the secret of Mr. Hergesheimer's career by perceiving that, with an admirable style of which he is both conscious and—very properly—proud, he has looked luxuriously through the world for subjects which his style will fit. Particularly has he emancipated himself from bondage to nook and corner. The small inland towns of *The Lay Anthony*, the blue Virginia valleys of *Mountain Blood*, the evolving Pennsylvania iron districts of *The Three Black Pennys*, the antique Massachusetts of *Java Head*, the fashionable hotels and houses of *Linda Condon*, the scattered exotic localities of the short stories—in all these Mr. Hergesheimer is at home with the cool insouciance of genius, at home as he could not be without an erudition founded in the keenest observation and research.

At the same time, he has not satisfied himself with the bursting catalogues of some types of naturalism. "The individuality of places and hours absorbed me . . . the perception of the inanimate moods of place. . . . Certainly houses and night and hills were often

more vivid to me than the people in or out of them." He has loved the scenes wherein his events are transacted; he has brooded over their moods, their significances. Neither pantheistic, however, nor very speculative, Mr. Hergesheimer does not endow places with a half-divine, a half-satanic sentience; instead he works more nearly in the fashion of his master Turgenev, or of Flaubert, scrutinizing the surfaces of landscapes and cities and human habitations until they gradually reveal what—for the particular observer—is the essence of their charm or horror, and come, obedient to the evoking imagination, into the picture.

Substantial as Mr. Hergesheimer makes his scene by a masterful handling of locality, he goes still further, adds still another dimension, by his equally masterful handling of the past as an element in his microcosm. "There was at least this to be said for what I had, in writing, laid back in point of time—no one had charged me with an historical novel," he boasts. Readers in general hardly notice how large a use of history appears in, for instance, *The Three Black Pennys* and *Java Head*. The one goes as far back as to colonial Pennsylvania for the beginning of its chronicle and the other as far as to Salem in the days of the first clipper ship; and yet by no paraphernalia of languid airs or archaic idioms or strutting heroics does either of the novels fall into the orthodox historical tradition. They have the vivid, multiplied detail of a contemporary record. And this is the more notable for the reason that the characters in each of them stand against the

background of a highly technical profession—that of iron-making through three generations, that of shipping under sail to all the quarters of the earth. The wharves of Mr. Hergesheimer's Salem, the furnaces of his Myrtle Forge, are thick with accurate, pungent, delightful facts.

If he has explored the past in a deliberate hunt for picturesque images of actuality with which to incrust his narrative, and has at times—particularly in *The Three Black Pennys*—given it an exaggerated patina, nevertheless he has refused to yield himself to the mere spell of the past and has regularly subdued its "colors and scents and emotions" to his own purposes. His materials may be rococo, but not his use of them. The conflict between his personal preference for luxury and his artistic passion for austerity shows itself in his methods with history: though the historical periods which interest him are bounded, one may say, by the minuet and the music-box, he permits the least possible contagion of prettiness to invade his plots. They are fresh and passionate, simple and real, however elaborate their trappings. With the fullest intellectual sophistication, Mr. Hergesheimer has artistically the courage of naïveté. He subtracts nothing from the common realities of human character when he displays it in some past age, but preserves it intact. The charming erudition of his surfaces is added to reality, not substituted for it.

Without question the particular triumph of these novels is the women who appear in them. Decorative

art in fiction has perhaps never gone farther than with Taou Yuen, the marvelous Manchu woman brought home from Shanghai to Salem as wife of a Yankee skipper in *Java Head*. She may be taken as focus and symbol of Mr. Hergesheimer's luxurious inclinations. By her bewildering complexity of costume, by her intricate ceremonial observances, by the impenetrability of her outward demeanor, she belongs rather to art than to life—an Oriental Galatea radiantly adorned but not wholly metamorphosed from her native marble. Only at intervals does some glimpse or other come of the tender flesh shut up in her magnificent garments or of the tender spirit schooled by flawless, immemorial discipline to an absolute decorum. That such glimpses come just preserves her from appearing a mere figure of tapestry, a fine mechanical toy. The Salem which before her arrival seems quaintly formal enough immediately thereafter seems by contrast raw and new, and her beauty glitters like a precious gem in some plain man's house.

Much the same effect, on a less vivid scale, is produced in *The Three Black Pennys* by the presence on the Pennsylvania frontier—it is almost that—of Ludowika Winscombe, who has always lived at Court and who brings new fragrances, new dainty rites, into the forest; and in *Mountain Blood* by the presence among the Appalachian highlands of that ivory, icy meretrix Meta Beggs who plans to drive the best possible bargain for her virgin favors. Meta carries the decorative traits of Mr. Hergesheimer's women to the point

at which they suggest the marionette too much; by his methods, of course, he habitually runs the risk of leaving the flesh and blood out of his women. He leaves out, at least, with no fluttering compunctions, any special concern for the simpler biological aspects of the sex: "It was not what the woman had in common with a rabbit that was important, but her difference. On one hand that difference was moral, but on the other æsthetic; and I had been absorbed by the latter." "I couldn't get it into my head that loveliness, which had a trick of staying in the mind at points of death when all service was forgotten, was rightly considered to be of less importance than the sweat of some kitchen drudge."

Such robust doctrine is a long way from the customary sentimentalism of novelists about maids, wives, mothers, and widows. Indeed, Mr. Hergesheimer, like Poe before him, inclines very definitely toward beauty rather than toward humanity, where distinctions may be drawn between them. In Linda Condon, however, his most remarkable creation, he has brought humanity and beauty together in an intimate fusion. Less exotic than Taou Yuen, Linda, with her straight black bang and her extravagant simplicity of taste, is no less exquisite. And like Taou Yuen she affords Mr. Hergesheimer the opportunity he most desires—"to realize that sharp sense of beauty which came from a firm, delicate consciousness of certain high pretensions, valors, maintained in the face of imminent destruction. . . . In that category none was sharper than the

charm of a woman, soon to perish, in a vanity of array as momentary and iridescent as a May-fly." It is as the poet musing upon the fleet passage of beauty rather than as the satirist mocking at the vanity of human wishes that Mr. Hergesheimer traces the career of Linda Condon; but both poet and satirist meet in his masterpiece.

A woman as lovely as a lyric, she is almost as insensible as a steel blade or a bright star. The true marvel is that beauty so cold can provoke such conflagrations. Granted—and certain subtle women decline to grant it—that Linda with her shining emptiness could have kindled the passion she kindles in the story, what must be the blackness of her discovery that when her beauty goes she will have left none of the generous affection which, had she herself given it through life, she might by this time have earned in quantities sufficient to endow and compensate her for old age! Mr. Hergesheimer does not soften the blow when it comes—he even adds to her agony the clear consciousness that she cannot feel her plight as more passionate natures might. But he allows her, at the last, an intimation of immortality. From her unresponding beauty, she sees, her sculptor lover has caught a madness eventually sublimated to a Platonic vision which, partially forgetful of her as an individual, has made him and his works great. Without, in the common way, modeling her at all, he has snared the essence of her spirit and has set it—as such mortal things go—everlastingly in bronze.

If Mr. Hergesheimer offers Linda in the end only the hard comfort of a perception come at largely through her intellect, still as far as the art of his novel is concerned he has immensely gained by his refusal to make any trivial concession to natural weaknesses. His latest conclusion is his best. *The Lay Anthony* ends in accident, *Mountain Blood* in melodrama; *The Three Black Pennys*, more successful than its predecessors, fades out like the Penny line; *Java Head* turns sharply away from its central theme, almost as if *Hamlet* should concern itself during a final scene with Horatio's personal perplexities. Now the conclusions of a novelist are on the whole the test of his judgment and his honesty; and it promises much for fiction that Mr. Hergesheimer has advanced so steadily in this respect through his seven books.

He has advanced, too, in his use of decoration, which reached its most sumptuous in *Java Head* and which in *Linda Condon* happily began to show a more austere control. The question which criticism asks is whether Mr. Hergesheimer has not gone as far as a practitioner of the decorative arts can go, and whether he ought not, during the remainder of the eminent career which awaits him, to work rather in the direction marked by *Linda Condon* than in that marked by *Java Head*. The rumor that his friends advise him to become a "period novelist" must disquiet his admirers—even those among them who cannot think him likely to act upon advice so dangerous to his art. Doubtless he could go on and write another *Salammbô*, but he does

not need to: he has already written *Java Head*. When a novelist has reached the limits of decoration there still stretches out before him the endless road—which Mr. Hergesheimer has given evidence that he can travel—of the interpretation and elucidation of human character and its devious fortunes in the world.

CHAPTER IV

NEW STYLE

1. Emergent Types

Ellen Glasgow

Fiction, no less than life, has its broad flats and shallows from which distinction emerges only now and then, when some superior veracity or beauty or energy lifts a novelist or a novel above the mortal average. Consider, for example, the work of Ellen Glasgow. In her representations of contemporary Virginia she long stood with the local colorists, practising with more grace than strength what has come to seem an older style; in her heroic records of the Virginia of the Civil War and Reconstruction she frequently fell into the orthodox monotone of the historical romancers. By virtue of two noticeable qualities, however, she has in her later books emerged from the level established by the majority and has ranged herself with writers who seem newer and fresher than her early models.

One quality is her sense for the texture of life, which imparts to *The Miller of Old Church* a thickness of atmosphere decisively above that of most local color novels. She has admitted into her story various classes

of society which traditional Virginia fiction regularly neglects; she has enriched her narrative with fresh and sweet descriptions of the soft Virginia landscape; she has bound her plot together with the best of all ligatures—intelligence. If certain of her characters—Abel Revercomb, Reuben Merryweather, Betsey Bottom—seem at times a little too much like certain of Thomas Hardy's rustics, still the resemblance is hardly greater than that which actually exists between parts of rural Virginia and rural Wessex; Miss Glasgow is at least as faithful to her scene as if she had devoted herself solely to a chronicle of rich planters, poor whites, and obeisant freedmen. Without any important sacrifice of reality she has enlarged her material by lifting it toward the plane of the pastoral and rounding it out with poetic abundance instead of whittling it down with provincial shrewdness or weakening it with village sentimentalism.

That she does not lack shrewdness appears from the evidences in *Life and Gabriella* and still more in *Virginia* of her second distinctive quality—a critical attitude toward the conventions of her locality. In one Miss Glasgow exhibits a modern Virginia woman breaking her medieval shell in New York; in the other she examines the subsequent career of a typical Southern heroine launched into life with no equipment but loveliness and innocence. Loveliness, Virginia finds, may fade and innocence may become a nuisance if wisdom happens to be needed. She fails to understand and eventually to "hold" her husband; she gives herself so

completely to her children that in the end she has nothing left for herself and is tragically dispensable to them. *Virginia* is at once the most thorough and the most pathetic picture extant of the American woman as Victorianism conceived and shaped and misfitted her. But the book is much more than a tract for feminism to point to: it is unexpectedly full and civilized, packed with observation, tinctured with omen and irony.

William Allen White

If Miss Glasgow emerges considerably—though not immensely—above the deadly levels of fiction, so does William Allen White. What lifts him is his hearty, bubbling energy. He has the courage of all his convictions, of all his sentiments, of all his laughter, of all his tears. He has a multitude of right instincts and sound feelings, and he habitually reverts to them in the intervals between his stricter hours of thought. Such stricter hours he is far from lacking. They address themselves especially to the task of showing why and how corruption works in politics and of tracing those effects of private greed which ruin souls and torture societies. The hero-villains of *A Certain Rich Man* and of *In the Heart of a Fool* tread all the paths of selfishness and come to hard ends in punishment for the offense of counting the head higher than the heart.

These books being crowded with quite obvious doctrine it is fair to say of them that they directly inculcate the life of simple human virtues and services and

accuse the grosser American standards of success. They do this important thing within the limits of moralism, progressivism, and optimism. John Barclay, the rich man, when his evil course is run, hastily, unconvincingly divests himself of his spoils and loses his life in an heroic accident. Thomas Van Dorn, the fool, finally arrives at desolation because there has been no God in his heart, but he has no more instructive background for a contrast to folly than the spectacle of a nation entering the World War with what is here regarded as a vast purgation, a magnificent assertion of the divinity in mankind. How such a conclusion withers in the light and fire of time! Right instincts and sound feelings are not, after all, enough for a novelist: somewhere in his work there must appear an intelligence undiverted by even the kindliest intentions; much as he must be of his world, he must be also in some degree outside it as well as above it.

Yet to be of his world with such knowledge as Mr. White has of Kansas gives him one kind of distinction if not a different kind. His two longer narratives sweep epically down from the days of settlement to the time when the frontier order disappeared under the pressure of change. He has a moving erudition in the history and characters and motives and humors of the small inland town; no one has ever known more about the outward customs and behaviors of an American state than Mr. White. His shorter stories not less than his novels are racy with actualities: he has caught the dialect of his time and place with an ear that is

singularly exact; he has cut the costumes of his men and villages so that hardly a wrinkle shows. In particular he understands the pathos of boyhood, seen not so much, however, through the serious eyes of boys themselves as through the eyes of reminiscent men reflecting upon young joys and griefs that will shortly be left behind and upon little pomps that can never come to anything. *The Court of Boyville* is now hilariously comic, now tenderly elegiac. None of Mr. White's contemporaries has quite his power to shift from bursts of laughter to sudden, agreeable tears. That flood of moods and words upon which he can be swept beyond the full control of his analytical faculties is but a symptom of the energy which, when he turns to narrative, sweeps him and his readers out of pedestrian gaits.

Ernest Poole

By comparison the more critical Ernest Poole suffers from a deficiency of both verve and humor. He began his career with the happy discovery of a picturesque, untrodden neighborhood of New York City in *The Harbor;* he consolidated his reputation with the thoughtful study of a troubled father of troubling daughters in *His Family;* since then he has sounded no new chords, strumming on his instrument as if magic had deserted him. Perhaps it was not quite magic by which his work originally won its hearing. There is something a little unmagical, a little mechanical, about the fancy which personifies the harbor of New York

and makes it recur and reverberate throughout that first novel. The matter was significant, but the manner seems only at times spontaneous and at times only industrious. Intelligence, ideas, observations, perception—these hold up well in *The Harbor;* it is poetry that flags, though poetry is invoked to carry out the pattern. Over humor Mr. Poole has but moderate power, as he has perhaps but moderate interest in it: his characters are themselves either fiercely or sadly serious, and they are seen with an eye which has not quite the forgiveness of laughter or the pity of disillusion. Roger Gale in *His Family* broods, mystified, over what seems to him the drift of his daughters into the furious currents of a new age. Yet they fall into three categories—with some American reservations—of mother, nun, courtesan, about which there is nothing new; and all the tragic elements of the book are almost equally ancient. Without the spacious vision which sees eternities in hours *His Family* contents itself too much with being a document upon a particular hour of history. It has more kindliness than criticism.

Mr. Poole, one hates to have to say, is frequently rather less than serious: he is earnest; at moments he is hardly better than merely solemn. Nevertheless, *The Harbor* and *His Family—His Family* easily the better of the two—are works of honest art and excellent documents upon a generation. Mr. Poole feels the earth reeling beneath the desperate feet of men; he sees the millions who are hopelessly bewildered; he hears

the cries of rage and fear coming from those who foretell chaos; he catches the exaltation of those who imagine that after so long a shadow the sunshine of freedom and justice will shortly break upon them. With many generous expectations he waits for the revolution which shall begin the healing of the world's wounds. Meanwhile he paints the dissolving lineaments of the time in colors which his own softness keeps from being very stern or very deep but which are gentle and appealing.

Henry B. Fuller

The peculiar strength and the peculiar weakness of Henry B. Fuller lie in his faithful habit of being a dilettante. A generation ago, when the æsthetic poets and critics were in bloom, Mr. Fuller in *The Chevalier of Pensieri-Vani* and *The Chatelaine of La Trinité* played with sentimental pilgrimages in Italy or the Alps, packing his narratives with the most affectionate kind of archæology and yet forever scrutinizing them with a Yankee smile. A little later, when Howells's followers had become more numerous, Mr. Fuller joined them with minute, accurate, amused representations of Chicago in *The Cliff-Dwellers* and *With the Procession.* Then, as if bored with longer flights, he settled himself to writing sharp-eyed stories concerning the life of art as conducted in Chicago—*Under the Skylights*—and of Americans traveling in Europe—*From the Other Side, Waldo Trench and Others.* After *Spoon River Anthology* Mr. Fuller took such

hints from its method as he needed in the pungent dramatic sketches of *Lines Long and Short*. One of these sketches, called *Postponement*, has autobiography, it may be guessed, in its ironic, wistful record of a Midwestern American who all his life longed and planned to live in Europe but who found himself ready to gratify his desire only in the dread summer of 1914, when peace departed from the earth to stay away, he saw, at least as long as he could hope to live. There is the note of intimate experience, if not of autobiography, in these lucid words spoken about the hero of *On the Stairs:* "he wanted to be an artist and give himself out; he wanted to be a gentleman and hold himself in. An entangling, ruinous paradox."

Fate, if not fatalism, has kept Mr. Fuller, this dreamer about old lands, always resident in the noisiest city of the newest land and always less, it seems, than thoroughly expressive. Had there been more passion in his constitution he might, perhaps, have either detached himself from Chicago altogether or submerged himself in it to a point of reconciliation. But passion is precisely what Mr. Fuller seems to lack or to be chary of. He dwells above the furies. As one consequence his books, interesting as every one of them is, suffer from the absence of emphasis. His utterance comes in the tone of an intelligent drawl. Spiritually in exile, he lives somewhat unconcerned with the drama of existence surrounding him, as if his gaze were farther off. Yet though deficiency in passion has made Mr. Fuller an amateur, it has allowed him the longest

tether in the exercise of a free, penetrating intelligence. He is not lightly jostled out of his equilibrium by petty irritations or swept off his feet by those torrents of ready emotion which sweep through popular fiction by their own momentum. Whenever, in *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, Hamlin Garland brings Mr. Fuller into his story, there is communicated the sense of a vivid intellect somehow keeping its counsel and yet throwing off rays of suggestion and illumination.

Without much question it is by his critical faculties that Mr. Fuller excels. He has the poetic energy to construct, but less frequently to create. Such endowments invite him to the composition of memoirs. He has, indeed, in *On the Stairs*, produced the memoirs, in the form of a novel, of a Chicagoan who could never adapt himself to his native habitat and who gradually sees the control of life slipping out of his hands to those of other, more potent, more decisive, less divided men. But suppose Mr. Fuller were to surrender the ironic veil of fiction behind which he has preferred to hide his own spiritual adventures! Suppose he were avowedly to write the history of the arts and letters in Chicago! Suppose he were, rather more confidingly, to trace the career of an actual, attentive dilettante in his thunderous town!

Mary Austin

Criticism perceives in Mary Austin the certain signs of a power which, for reasons not entirely clear, has

as yet failed to express itself completely in forms of art. She herself prefers less to be judged by any of her numerous books than to be regarded as a figure laboring somewhat anonymously toward the development of a national culture founded at all points on national realities. Behind this preference is a personal experience which must be taken into account in any analysis of Mrs. Austin's work. Born in Illinois, she went at twenty to California, to live between the Sierra Nevada and the Mohave Desert. There she was soon spiritually acclimated to the wilderness, studied among the Indians the modes of aboriginal life, and in time came to bear the relation almost of a prophetess to the people among whom she lived. Her first book, *The Land of Little Rain*, interpreted the desert chiefly as landscape. Since then she has, it may be said, employed the desert as a measure of life, constantly bringing from it a sense for the primal springs of existence into all her comment upon human affairs. *The Man Jesus* examines the career of a desert-dweller who preached a desert-wisdom to a confused world. Her play *The Arrow Maker* exhibits the behavior and fortunes of a desert-seeress among her own people. *Love and the Soul-Maker* anatomizes love as a primal force struggling with and through civilization. From Paiute and Shoshone medicine men, the only poets Mrs. Austin knew during her formative years, she acquired that grounding in basic rhythms which led her to write free verse years before it became the fashion in sophisticated circles and persuaded her that American poetry cannot

afford to overlook the experiments and successes of the first American poets in fitting expression to the actual conditions of the continent.

It has been of course a regular tradition among novelists in the United States to weigh the "settlements" in a balance and to represent them as lacking the hardy virtues of the backwoods. Mrs. Austin goes beyond this naïve process. Whether she deals with the actual frontier—as in *Isidro* or *Lost Borders* or *The Ford*—or with more crowded, more complex regions—as in *The Woman of Genius* or *26 Jayne Street*—she keeps her particular frontier in mind not as an entity or a dogma but as a symbol of the sources of human life and society. She creates, it seems, out of depths of reflection and out of something even deeper than reflection. She has observed the unconscious instincts of the individual and the long memories of the race. The effect upon her novels of such methods has been to widen their sympathies and to warm and lift their style; it has also been to render them sometimes defective in structure and sometimes obscure in meaning. If they are not glib, neither are they always clean-cut or direct. Along with her generous intelligence she has a good deal of the stubborn wilfulness of genius, and she has never achieved a quite satisfactory fusion of the two qualities. She wears something like the sibyl's robes and speaks with something like the sibyl's strong accents, but the cool, hard discipline of the artist or of the exact scholar only occasionally serves her. Much of her significance lies in her promise. Faithful to her

original vision, she has moved steadily onward, growing, writing no book like its predecessor, applying her wisdom continually to new knowledge, leaving behind her a rich detritus which she will perhaps be willing to consider detritus if it helps to nourish subsequent generations.

Immigrants

The newer stocks and neighborhoods in the United States have their fictive records as well as the longer established ones, and there is growing up a class of immigrant books which amounts almost to a separate department of American literature. From Denmark, Germany, Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, Russia, Rumania, Syria, Italy have come passionate pilgrims who have set down, mostly in plain narratives, the chronicles of their migration. As the first Americans contended with nature and the savages, so these late arrivals contend with men and a civilization no less hostile toward them; their writings continue, in a way, the earliest American tradition of a concern with the risks and contrivances by which pioneers cut their paths. Even when the immigrants write fiction they tend to choose the same materials and thus to fall into formulas, which are the more observable since the writers are the survivors in the struggle and naturally tell about the successes rather than the failures in the process of Americanization.

Not all the stocks, of course, are equally interested in fiction or gifted at it: the Russian Jews have the most notable novels to their credit. Though these are generally composed by men not born in this country,

in Yiddish, and so belong to the history of that most international of literatures, certain of them, having been translated, belong obviously as well as actually to the common treasure of the nation. Shalom Aleichem's *Jewish Children* and Leon Kobrin's *A Lithuanian Village* surely belong, though their scenes are laid in Europe; as do Sholom Asch's vivid, moving novels *Mottke the Vagabond*—concerned with the underworld of Poland—and *Uncle Moses*—concerned with the New York Ghetto—the recent translations of which are slowly bringing to a wider American public the evidence that a really eminent novelist has hitherto been partly hidden by his alien tongue.

There is no question whatever that the work of Abraham Cahan, Yiddish scholar, journalist, novelist, belongs to the American nation. As far back as the year in which Stephen Crane stirred many sensibilities with his *Maggie*, the story of an Irish slum in Manhattan, Mr. Cahan produced in *Yekl* a book of similar and practically equal merit concerning a Jewish slum in the same borough. But it and his later books *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories* and *The White Terror and the Red* have been overwhelmed by novels by more familiar men dealing with more familiar communities. The same has been true even of his masterpiece, the most important of all immigrant novels, *The Rise of David Levinsky*. It, too, records the making of an American, originally a reader of Talmud in a Russian village and eventually the principal figure in the cloak and suit trade in America. But it does

more than trace the career of Levinsky through his personal adventures: it traces the evolution of a great industry and represents the transplanted Russian Jews with affectionate exactness in all their modes of work and play and love—another conquest of a larger Canaan. Here are fused American hope and Russian honesty. At the end David, with all his New World wealth, lacks the peace he might have had but for his sacrifice of Old World integrity and faith. And yet the novel is very quiet in its polemic. Its hero has gained in power; he is no dummy to hang maxims on. Moving through a varied scene, gradually shedding the outward qualities of his race, he remains always an individual, gnawed at by love in the midst of his ambitions, subject to frailties which test his strength.

The fact that Mr. Cahan wrote *David Levinsky* not in his mother-tongue but in the language of his adopted country may be taken as a sign that American literature no less than the American population is being enlarged by the influx of fresh materials and methods. The methods of the Yiddish writers are, as might be expected, those of Russian fiction generally, though in this they were anticipated by the critical arguments of Howells and Henry James and are rivaled by the majority of the naturalistic novelists. Their materials, as might not be expected, have a sort of primitive power by comparison with which the orthodox native materials of fiction seem often pale and dusty. The older Americans, settled into smug routines, lack the vitality, the industry of the newcomers. They are less direct

and more provincial; they are bundled up in gentilities and petty habits; they hide behind old-fashioned reticences which soften the drama of their lives. With the newer stocks an ancient process begins again. Their affairs are conducted on the plane of desperate subsistence. Struggling to survive at all, they cry out in the language of hunger and death; almost naked in the struggle, they speak nakedly about livelihood and birth and death. Sooner or later the immigrants must be perceived to have added precious elements of passion and candor to American fiction.

2. The Revolt from the Village

Edgar Lee Masters

The newest style in American fiction dates from the appearance, in 1915, of *Spoon River Anthology*, though it required five years for the influence of that book to pass thoroughly over from poetry to prose. For nearly half a century native literature had been faithful to the cult of the village, celebrating its delicate merits with sentimental affection and with unwearied interest digging into odd corners of the country for persons and incidents illustrative of the essential goodness and heroism which, so the doctrine ran, lie beneath unexciting surfaces. Certain critical dispositions, aware of agrarian discontent or given to a preference for cities, might now and then lay disre-

spectful hands upon the life of the farm; but even these generally hesitated to touch the village, sacred since Goldsmith in spite of Crabbe, sacred since Washington Irving in spite of E. W. Howe.

The village seemed too cosy a microcosm to be disturbed. There it lay in the mind's eye, neat, compact, organized, traditional: the white church with tapering spire, the sober schoolhouse, the smithy of the ringing anvil, the corner grocery, the cluster of friendly houses; the venerable parson, the wise physician, the canny squire, the grasping landlord softened or outwitted in the end; the village belle, gossip, atheist, idiot; jovial fathers, gentle mothers, merry children; cool parlors, shining kitchens, spacious barns, lavish gardens, fragrant summer dawns, and comfortable winter evenings. These were elements not to be discarded lightly, even by those who perceived that time was discarding many of them as the industrial revolution went on planting ugly factories alongside the prettiest brooks, bringing in droves of aliens who used unfamiliar tongues and customs, and fouling the atmosphere with smoke and gasoline. Mr. Howe in *The Story of a Country Town* had long ago made it cynically clear—to the few who read him—that villages which prided themselves upon their pioneer energy might in fact be stagnant backwaters or dusty centers of futility, where existence went round and round while elsewhere the broad current moved away from them. Mark Twain in *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* had more recently put it bitterly on record that villages which prided

themselves upon their simple virtues might from lack of temptation have become a hospitable soil for meanness and falsehood, merely waiting for the proper seed. And Clarence Darrow in his elegiac *Farmington* had insisted that one village at least had been the seat of as much restless longing as of simple bliss. *Spoon River Anthology* in its different dialect did little more than to confirm these mordant, neglected testimonies.

That Mr. Masters was not neglected must be explained in part, of course, by his different dialect. The Greek anthology had suggested to him something which was, he said, "if less than verse, yet more than prose"; and he went, with the step of genius, beyond any "formal resuscitation of the Greek epigrams, ironical and tender, satirical and sympathetic, as casual experiments in unrelated themes," to an "epic rendition of modern life" which suggests the novel in its largest aspects. An admirable scheme occurred to him: he would imagine a graveyard such as every American village has and would equip it with epitaphs of a ruthless veracity such as no village ever saw put into words. The effect was as if all the few honest epitaphs in the world had suddenly come together in one place and sent up a shout of revelation.

Conventional readers had the thrill of being shocked and of finding an opportunity to defend the customary reticences; ironical readers had the delight of coming upon a host of witnesses to the contrast which irony perpetually observes between appearance and reality; readers militant for the "truth" discovered an occasion

to demand that pious fictions should be done away with and the naked facts exposed to the sanative glare of noon. And all these readers, most of them unconsciously no doubt, shared the fearful joy of sitting down at an almost incomparably abundant feast of scandal. Where now were the mild decencies of Tiverton, of Old Chester, of Friendship Village? The roofs and walls of Spoon River were gone and the passers-by saw into every bedroom; the closets were open and all the skeletons rattled undenied; brains and breasts had unlocked themselves and set their most private treasures out for the most public gaze.

It was the scandal and not the poetry of *Spoon River*, criticism may suspect, which particularly spread its fame. Mr. Masters used an especial candor in affairs of sex, an instinct which, secretive everywhere, has rarely ever been so much so as in the American villages of fiction, where love ordinarily exhibited itself in none but the chastest phases, as if it knew no savage vagaries, transgressed no ordinances, shook no souls out of the approved routines. Reaction from too much sweet drove Mr. Masters naturally to too much sour; sex in Spoon River slinks and festers, as if it were an instinct which had not been schooled—however imperfectly—by thousands of years of human society to some modification of its rages and some civil direction of its restless power. But here, as with the other aspects of behavior in his village, he showed himself impatient, indeed violent, toward all subterfuges. There is filth, he said in effect, behind whited sepulchers;

drag it into the light and such illusions will no longer trick the uninstructed into paying honor where no honor appertains and will no longer beckon the deluded to an imitation of careers which are actually unworthy.

Spoon River has not even the outward comeliness which the village of tradition should possess: it is slack and shabby. Nor is its decay chronicled in any mood of tender pathos. What strikes its chronicler most is the general demoralization of the town. Except for a few saints and poets, whom he acclaims with a lyric ardor, the population is sunk in greed and hypocrisy and—as if this were actually the worst of all—complacent apathy. Spiritually it dwindles and rots; externally it clings to a pitiless decorum which veils its faults and almost makes it overlook them, so great has the breach come to be between its practices and its professions. Again and again its poet goes back to the heroic founders of Spoon River, back to the days which nurtured Lincoln, whose shadow lies mighty, beneficent, too often unheeded, over the degenerate sons and daughters of a smaller day; and from an older, robuster integrity Mr. Masters takes a standard by which he morosely measures the purposelessness and furtiveness and supineness and dulness of the village which has forgotten its true ancestors.

Anger like his springs from a poetic elevation of spirit; toward the end *Spoon River Anthology* rises to a mystical vision of human life by comparison with which the scavenging epitaphs of the first half seem,

though witty, yet insolent and trivial. It is perhaps not necessary to point out that the numerous poets and novelists who have learned a lesson from the book have learned it less powerfully from the difficult later pages than from those in which the text is easiest.

Mr. Masters himself has not always remembered the harder and better lesson. During a half dozen years he has published more than a half dozen books which have all inherited the credit of the *Anthology* but which all betray the turbulent, nervous habit of experimentation which makes up a large share of his literary character. There comes to mind the figure of a blindfolded Apollo, eager and lusty, who continually runs forward on the trail of poetry and truth but who, because of his blindfoldedness, only now and then strikes the central track. Five of Mr. Masters's later books are collections of miscellaneous verse; during the fruitful year 1920 he undertook two longer flights of fiction. In *Mitch Miller* he attempted in prose to write a new *Tom Sawyer* for the Spoon River district; in *Domesday Book* he applied the method of *The Ring and the Book* to the material of Starved Rock. The impulse of the first must have been much the same as Mark Twain's: a desire to catch in a stouter net than memory itself the recollections of boyhood which haunt disillusioned men. But as Mr. Masters is immensely less boylike than Mark Twain, elegy and argument thrust themselves into the chronicle of Mitch and Skeet, with an occasional tincture of a fierce hatred felt toward the politics and theology of Spoon River. A

story of boyhood, that lithe, muscular age, cannot carry such a burden of doctrine. The narrative is tangled in a snarl of moods. Its movement is often thick, its wings often gummed and heavy.

The same qualities may be noted in *Domesday Book*. Its scheme and machinery are promising: a philosophical coroner, holding his inquest over the body of a girl found mysteriously dead, undertakes to trace the mystery not only to its immediate cause but up to its primary source and out to its remotest consequences. At times the tale means to be an allegory of America during the troubled, roiled, destroying years of the war; at times it means to be a "census spiritual" of American society. Elenor Murray, in her birth and love and sufferings and desperate end, is represented as pure nature, "essential genius," acting out its fated processes in a world of futile or corrupting inhibitions. But Mr. Masters has less skill at portraying the sheer genius of an individual than at arraigning the inhibitions of the individual's society. When he steps down from his watch-tower of irony he can hate as no other American poet does. His hates, however, do not always pass into poetry; they too frequently remain hard, sullen masses of animosity not fused with his narrative but standing out from it and adding an unmistakable personal rhythm to the rough beat of his verse. So, too, do his heaps of turgid learning and his scientific speculations often remain undigested. A good many of his characters are cut to fit the narrative plan, not chosen from reality to make up the narrative. The

total effect is often crude and heavy; and yet beneath these uncompleted surfaces are the sinews of enormous power: a greedy gusto for life, a wide imaginative experience, tumultuous uprushes of emotion and expression, an acute if undisciplined intelligence, great masses of the veritable stuff of existence out of which great novels are made.

Sherwood Anderson

Spoon River Anthology has called forth a smaller number of deliberate imitations than might have been expected, and even they have utilized its method with a difference. Sherwood Anderson, for example, in *Winesburg, Ohio* speaks in accents and rhythms obstinately his own, though his book is, in effect, the *Anthology* "transprosed." Instead of inventing Winesburg immediately after Spoon River became famous he began his career more regularly, with the novels *Windy McPherson's Son* and *Marching Men*, in which he employed what has become the formula of revolt for recent naturalism. In both stories a superior youth, of rebellious energy and somewhat inarticulate ambition, detaches himself in disgust from his native village and makes his way to the city in search of that wealth which is the only thing the village has ever taught him to desire though it is unable to gratify his desires itself; and in both the youth, turned man, finds himself sickening with his prize in his hands and looks about him for some clue to the meaning of the mad

world in which he has succeeded without satisfaction. Sam McPherson, after a futile excursion through the proletariat in search of the peace which he has heard accompanies honest toil, settles down to the task of bringing up some children he has adopted and thus of forcing himself "back into the ranks of life." Beaut McGregor, refusing a handsome future at the bar, sets out to organize the workers of Chicago into marching men who drill in the streets and squares at night that they may be prepared for action if only they can find some sort of goal to march upon.

These novels ache with the sense of a dumb confusion in America; with a consciousness "of how men, coming out of Europe and given millions of square miles of black fertile land mines and forests, have failed in the challenge given them by fate and have produced out of the stately order of nature only the sordid disorder of man." Out of this ache of confusion comes no lucidity. Sam McPherson is not sure but that he will find parenthood as petty as business was brutal; Beaut McGregor sets his men to marching and their orderly step resounds through the final chapters of his career as here recorded, but no one knows what will come of it—they advance and wheel and retreat as blindly as any horde of peasants bound for a war about which they do not know the causes, in a distant country of which they have never heard the name. Mr. Anderson worked in his first books as if he were assembling documents on the eve of revolution. Village peace and stability have departed; ancient cus-

toms break or fade; the leaven of change stirs the lump.

From such arguments he turned aside to follow Mr. Masters into verse with *Mid-American Chants* and into scandal with *Winesburg, Ohio*. But touching scandal with beauty as his predecessor touched it with irony, Mr. Anderson constantly transmutes it. The young man who here sets out to make his fortune has not greatly hated Winesburg, and the imminence of his departure throws a vaguely golden mist over the village, which is seen in considerable measure through his generous if inexperienced eyes. A newspaper reporter, he directs his principal curiosity towards items of life outside the commonplace and thus offers Mr. Anderson the occasion to explore the moral and spiritual hinterlands of men and women who outwardly walk paths strict enough.

If the life of the tribe is unadventurous, he seems to say, there is still the individual, who, perhaps all the more because of the rigid decorums forced upon him, may adventure with secret desires through pathless space. Only, the pressure of too many inhibitions can distort human spirits into grotesque forms. The inhabitants of Winesburg tend toward the grotesque, now this organ of the soul enlarged beyond all symmetry, now that wasted away in a desperate disuse. They see visions which in some wider world might become wholesome realities or might be dispelled by the light but which in Winesburg must lurk about till they master and madden with the strength which the dark-

ness gives them. Religion, deprived in Winesburg of poetry, fritters its time away over Pharisaic ordinances or evaporates in cloudy dreams; sex, deprived of spontaneity, settles into fleshly habit or tortures its victim with the malice of a thwarted devil; heroism of deed or thought either withers into melancholy inaction or else protects itself with a sullen or ridiculous bravado.

Yet even among such pitiful surroundings Mr. Anderson walks tenderly. He honors youth, he feels beauty, he understands virtue, he trusts wisdom, when he comes upon them. He broods over his creatures with affection, though he makes no luxury of illusions. Much as he has detached himself from the cult of the village, he still cherishes the memories of some specific Winesburg. Much as he has detached himself from the hazy national optimism of an elder style in American thinking, he still cherishes a confidence in particular persons. *Winesburg, Ohio* springs from the more intimate regions of his mind and is consequently more humane and less doctrinaire than his earlier novels. It has a similar superiority over the book he wrote for 1920, *Poor White*, which returns to the device of a bewildered strong man rising from a dull obscurity, successful but unsatisfied. At the same time *Poor White* proceeds from an imagination which had been warmed with the creation of Winesburg and its people and is richer, fuller, deeper than the angular sagas of McPherson and McGregor. It does not yet show that Mr. Anderson can construct a large plot

or that his vision comes with a steady gleam; it shows, rather, that he is still fumbling in the confusion of current life to get hold of something true and simple and to make it clear.

Perhaps he tried in *Poor White* to manipulate a larger bulk than he is yet ready for. Perhaps because he was aware of that he has worked in his latest book, *The Triumph of the Egg*, with a variety of brief themes and has excelled even *Winesburg* in both poetry and truth. At least it is certain that he keeps on advancing in his art. Although life has not hardened for him, and he sees it still flowing or whirling, he steadily sharpens his outlines and perfects the fierce intensity of his style. Will his wisdom ever catch up with his passion and his observation? In each successive book he has revealed himself as still hot with the fever of his day's experiences. He has yet to show that he can go through the confusion of new spiritual adventures and then set them down, remembering, in tranquillity.

E. W. Howe

With *The Anthology of Another Town* E. W. Howe, obviously on the suggestion of Spoon River, returned to the caustic analysis of American village life which he may be said to have inaugurated in *The Story of a Country Town* almost forty years before. Then he had been young enough to feel it necessary to invent romantic embroideries for his grim tale, somewhat as Emily Brontë under somewhat similar circumstances

has done for *Wuthering Heights*—the novel which Mr. Howe's story most resembles. But all his inventions were stern, full of a powerful dissatisfaction, merciless toward the idyllic versions of country life which sweetened the decade of the eighties. Even among the pioneers whom Mr. Masters idealizes there were, according to the older man, slackness and shabbiness, and at the first opportunity to take their ease in the new world they had won from nature they sank down, too nerveless for passion or violence, into the easy vices: idleness, whining, gossip, drunkenness, sodden inutility. Against such qualities Mr. Howe has from the first proceeded with the doctrines of another Franklin, but of a Franklin without whimsical persuasions or elegant graces. Having apparently come to the conclusion that he was a failure as a novelist because he made no great stir with his experiments in that trade, he confined himself to more or less orthodox journalism for a generation, and then, retiring, founded his organ of "indignation and information"—*E. W. Howe's Monthly*—and began to pour forth the stream of aphoristic honesty which makes him easily first among the rural sages.

In no sense, of course, does he assume the cosmopolitan and international attitude which most of the naturalists assume: "Provincialism," he curtly says, "is the best thing in the world." Nor is he in any of the casual senses a radical: "In everything in which man is interested, the world knows what is best for him. . . . Millions of men have lived millions of years,

and tried everything." Neither has he any patience with speculation for its own sake: "There are no mysteries. Where does the wind come from? It doesn't matter: we know the habits of wind after it arrives." As to politics: "The people are always worsted in an election." As to altruism: "The long and the short of it is, whoever catches the fool first is entitled to shear him." As to love: "We cannot permit love to run riot; we must build fences around it, as we do around pigs." As to money: "In theory, it is not respectable to be rich. In fact, poverty is a disgrace." As to literature: "Poets are prophets whose prophesying never comes true." As to prudence: "Trying to live a spiritual life in a material world is the greatest folly I know anything about." As to persistent hopefulness: "Pessimism is always nearer the truth than optimism."

When the author of such aphorisms undertook to write another anthology about another town he naturally avoided the mystical elevation of Spoon River as well as its verse; he used the irony of a disillusioned man and the directness of a bullet. His scheme was not to assemble epitaphs for the dead of the village but to tell crisp anecdotes of the living. He had no iniquities in the human order to assail, since he believes that the order is just and that it rarely hurts any one who does not deserve to be hurt by reason of some avoidable imbecility. He made no specialty of scandal; he did not inquire curiously into the byways of sex; he let pathology alone. He appears in the book to be

—as he is in the flesh—a wise old man letting his memory run through the town and recalling bits of decent, illuminating gossip. He is willing to tell a fantastic yarn with a dry face or to tuck a tragedy in a sentence; to repeat some village legend in his own low tones or to puncture some village bubble with a cynical inquiry.

Yet for all his acceptance and tolerance of the village he is far from helping to continue the sentimental traditions concerning it. The common sense which he considers the basis of all philosophy—"If it isn't common sense, it isn't philosophy"—he has the gift of expounding in a language which is piercingly individual. It strips his village of trivial local color and reduces it to the simplest terms—making it out a more or less fortuitous congregation of human beings of whom some work and some play, some behave themselves and some do not, some consequently prosper and some fail, some are happy and some are miserable. His village is not dainty, like a poem, for the reason that he believes no village ever was; at least he has never seen one like that. Downrightness like his is death to mere pretty notions about tribes and towns quite as truly as are the positive indictments brought against them by Mr. Masters and Mr. Anderson. If Mr. Howe is less vivid than those two, because he distrusts passion and poetry, he is also quieter and surer. "I am not an Agnostic; I *know*. . . . I have lived a long time, and my real problems have always been simple."

Sinclair Lewis

Spoon River Anthology was a collection of poems, *Winesburg, Ohio* was a collection of short stories, *The Anthology of Another Town* was a collection of anecdotes. It remained for a novel in the customary form, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, to bring to hundreds of thousands the protest against the village which these books brought to thousands.

Mr. Lewis, like Mr. Masters, clearly has revenges to take upon the narrow community in which he grew up, nourished, no doubt, on the complacency native to such neighborhoods and yet increasingly resentful. Less poetical than his predecessor, the younger novelist went further in both his specifications and his generalizations. Instead of brooding closely, ironically, profoundly, under the black wings of the thought of death, Mr. Lewis satisfies himself with a slashing portrait of Gopher Prairie done to the life with the fingers of ridicule. He has photographic gifts of accuracy; he has all the arts of mimicry; he has a tireless gusto in his pursuit of the tedious commonplace. Each item of his evidence is convincing, and the accumulation is irresistible. No other American small town has been drawn with such exactness of detail in any other American novel. Various elements of scandal crop out here and there, but the principal accusation which Mr. Lewis brings against his village—and indeed against all villages—is that of being dull. "It is contentment . . . the contentment of the quiet dead, who

are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dulness made God."

Not dulness itself so much as dulness militant and prospering arouses this satirist. The whole world, he believes, is being leveled by the march of machines into one monotonous uniformity, before which all the individual colors and graces and prides and habits flee—or would flee if there were any asylum still uninvaded. Thus Mr. Lewis's voice continues the opposition which Wordsworth raised to the coming of a railroad into his paradise among the Lakes and which Ruskin and Matthew Arnold and William Morris raised to the standardization of life which went on during their century. The American voice, however, speaks of American conditions. The villages of the Middle West, it asseverates, have been conquered and converted by the legions of mediocrity, and now, grown rich and vain, are setting out to carry the dingy banner, led by the booster's calliope and the evangelist's bass drum, farther than it has ever gone before—to make provincialism imperialistic; so that all the native and instinctive virtues, freedoms, powers must rally in their own defense.

Mr. Lewis hates such dulness—the village virus—as the saints hate sin. Indeed it is with a sort of new Puritanism that he and his contemporaries wage against the dull a war something like that which certain of their elders once waged against the bad. Only a

satiric anger helped out by the sense of being on crusade could have sustained the author of *Main Street* through the laborious compilation of those brilliant details which illustrate the complacency of Gopher Prairie and which seem less brilliant than laborious to bystanders not particularly concerned in his crusade. The question, of course, arises whether the ancient war upon stupidity is a better literary cause to fight in than the equally ancient war upon sin. Both narrow themselves to doctrinal contentions, apparently forgetting for the moment that either being virtuous or being intelligent is but a half—or thereabouts—of existence, and that the two qualities are hopelessly intertwined. There are thoughtful novelists who, as they do not condemn lapses of virtue too harshly, so also do not too harshly condemn deficiencies of intelligence, feeling that the common humanity of men and women is enough to make them fit for fiction. Mr. Lewis must be thought of as sitting in the seat of the scornful, with the satirists rather than with the poets, must be seen to recall the earlier, vexed, sardonic *Spoon River* rather than the later, calmer, loftier.

Satire and moralism, however, have large rights in the domain of literature. Had Mr. Lewis lacked remarkable gifts he could never have written a book which got its vast popularity by assailing the populace. The reception of *Main Street* is a memorable episode in literary history. Thousands doubtless read it merely to quarrel with it; other thousands to find out what all the world was talking about; still other thou-

sands to rejoice in a satire which they thought to be at the expense of stupid people never once identified with themselves; but that thousands and hundreds of thousands read it is proof enough that complacency was not absolutely victorious and that the war was on.

Zona Gale

Before *Main Street* Sinclair Lewis, though the author of such promising novels as *Our Mr. Wrenn* and *The Job*, had been forced by the neglect of his more serious work to earn a living with the smarter set among American novelists, writing bright, colloquial, amusing chatter for popular magazines. If it seems a notable achievement for a temper like Mr. Masters's to have helped pave the way to popularity for Mr. Lewis, it seems yet more notable to have performed a similar service for Zona Gale, who for something like a decade before *Spoon River Anthology* had had a comfortable standing among the sweeter set. She was the inventor of Friendship Village, one of the sweetest of all the villages from Miss Mitford and Mrs. Gaskell down. Friendship lay ostensibly in the Middle West, but it actually stood—if one may be pardoned an appropriate metaphor—upon the confectionery shelf of the fiction shop, preserved in a thick syrup and set up where a tender light could strike across it at all hours. In story after story Miss Gale varied the same device: that of showing how childlike children are, how sisterly are sisters, how brotherly are brothers, how

motherly are mothers, how fatherly are fathers, how grandmotherly and grandfatherly are grandmothers and grandfathers, and how loverly are all true lovers of whatever age, sex, color, or condition. But beneath the human kindness which had permitted Miss Gale to fall into this technique lay the sinews of a very subtle intelligence; and she needed only the encouragement of a changing public taste to be able to escape from her sugary preoccupations. Though the action of *Miss Lulu Bett* takes place in a different village, called Warbleton, it might as well have been in Friendship—in Friendship seen during a mood when its creator had grown weary of the eternal saccharine. Now and then, she realized, some spirit even in Friendship must come to hate all those idyllic posturings; now and then in some narrow bosom there must flash up the fires of youth and revolution. It is so with Lulu Bett, dim drudge in the house of her silly sister and of her sister's pompous husband: a breath of life catches at her and she follows it on a pitiful adventure which is all she has enough vitality to achieve but which is nevertheless real and vivid in a waste of dulness.

Here was an occasion to arraign Warbleton as Mr. Lewis was then arraigning Gopher Prairie; Miss Gale, instead of heaping up a multitude of indictments, categorized and docketed, followed the path of indirection which—by a paradoxical axiom of art—is a shorter cut than the highway of exposition or anathema. Her story is as spare as the virgin frame of Lulu Bett;

her style is staccato in its lucid brevity, like Lulu's infrequent speeches; her eloquence is not that of a torrent of words and images but that of comic or ironic or tragic meaning packed in a syllable, a gesture, a dumb silence. Miss Gale riddles the tedious affectations of the Deacon household almost without a word of comment; none the less she exhibits them under a withering light. The daughter, she says, "was as primitive as pollen"—and biology rushes in to explain Di's blind philanderings. "In the conversations of Dwight and Ina," it is said of the husband and wife, "you saw the historical home forming in clots in the fluid wash of the community"—and anthropology holds the candle. Grandma Bett is, for the moment, the symbol of decrepit age, as Lulu is the symbol of bullied spinsterhood. Yet in the midst of applications so universal the American village is not forgotten, little as it is alluded to. If the Friendships are sweet and dainty, so are they—whether called Warbleton or something less satiric—dull and petty, and they fashion their Deacons no less than their Pelleases and Ettares. Thus hinting, Miss Gale, in her clear, flutelike way, joins the chorus in which others play upon noisier instruments.

Floyd Dell

The year which saw the appearance of *Main Street* and *Miss Lulu Bett* saw also that of *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton's acid delineation of the village of Manhattan in the genteel seventies, given over to

the "innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience"; saw Mary Borden's *The Romantic Woman,* with its cosmopolitan amusement at the village of Iroquois, otherwise Chicago; and saw Floyd Dell's *Moon-Calf,* which, standing on the other side of controversy, lacks not only the disposition to sentimentalize the village but even the disposition to ridicule it.

Mr. Dell's emancipation is the fruit of a revolutionary detachment from village standards which is too complete to have left traces of any such rupture as is implied in almost every paragraph of *Main Street. Moon-Calf,* recounting the adventures of a young poet in certain river counties and towns and villages of Illinois, touches without heat upon the spiritual and intellectual limitations of those neighborhoods. It settles no old scores. It relates an unconventional career without conventional reproaches and also without conventional heroics. Felix Fay dreams and blunders and suffers but he goes on growing like a tree, pushing his head up through one level of development after another until he stands above the minor annoyances of his immaturity and looks out over a broader world. He has a soul which is naturally socialist and yet he never loses himself in proclamations or statistics. He can be fresh and hopeful and yet learn from the remarkable old men he encounters. He lives and loves with an instinctive freedom and yet he holds himself equally secure from devastating extravagances and devastating repressions. Mr. Dell writes as if

he had steadier nerves than most of the naturalists; as if he regarded their war upon the village as an ancient brawl which may now be assumed to have been as much settled as it ever will be. At least, it seems scarcely worth wrangling over. The spirit seeking to release itself from trivial conditions behaves most intelligently when it discreetly takes them into account and concerns itself with them only enough to escape entanglements. Mr. Dell leaves it to the moralists and the satirists to whip offenders, while he himself goes on to construct some monument of beauty upon the ground which moralism and satire are laboring to clear.

Moon-Calf is very beautiful. Felix has a poetic gift sufficient to warm the record with fine verses and delicate susceptibilities upon which his adventures leave exquisite impressions. Even when his rebellion is at its highest pitch he wastes little energy in hating and so avoids the astringency and perturbation of a state of mind which is always perilous. To say Felix Fay is more or less to mean Floyd Dell, for the narrative is obviously autobiographic at many points. But were it entirely invention it would testify none the less to the affection with which this novelist feels his world and the lucidity with which he represents it. He has a genuine zest for human life, enjoying it, even when it invites mirth or anger, because of the form and color and movement which he perceives everywhere and particularly because of the solid texture of reality of which he is admirably aware. Hatred closes the eyes to a multitude of charms. If Mr. Dell suffered from

it he could never have enriched his fabric as he has with so many circumstances chosen with an unargumentative hand; he could never have extracted so much drama out of dusty people. Had he been a sentimentalist he might have fallen into the soft processes of the local color school when it came to portraying the various communities through which Felix takes his way. Instead, the story is everywhere stiffened with intelligence. Felix has no adventures more exciting than his successive discoveries of new ideas. Even the women he loves fit into the pattern of his career as a thinking being, and he emerges, however moved, with a surer grasp of his expanding universe. That grasp would lack much of its confidence if Mr. Dell employed a style less masterly. As it is, he writes with a candid lucidity which everywhere lets in the light and with a grace which rounds off the edges that mark the pamphlet but not the work of art. He can be at once downright and graceful, at once sincere and impersonal, at once revolutionary and restrained, at once impassioned and reflective, at once enamored of truth and scrupulous for beauty.

When Felix Fay had escaped his original villages and had taken to the wider pursuit of freedom in Chicago there was another chapter of his career to be recorded; and that Mr. Dell sets down in *The Briary-Bush*, wherein Felix finds that the trail of freedom ends, for him, in madness and loneliness. From the first, though this moon-calf has steadily blundered toward detachment from the common order, some

aching instinct has left him hungry for solid ground to stand on. The conflict troubles him. He can succeed in his immediate occupations but he cannot understand his powers or feel confident in his future. His world whirls round and round, menaces, eludes, threatens to vanish altogether. Thrown by dim forces into the arms of Rose-Ann, who seeks freedom no less restlessly than he, he is married, and the two begin their passionate experiment at a union which shall have no bonds but their common determination to be free. Charming slaves of liberty! Felix is at heart a Puritan and cannot take the world lightly, as it comes. His blunders bruise and wound him. He punishes himself for all his vagaries. Rose-Ann is not a Puritan, but she too has instincts that will not surrender, any more than Felix's, to the doctrines which they both profess: jealousy sleeps within her, and potential motherhood. She and Felix come to feel that they have shirked life by their deliberate childlessness and that life has deserted them. Yet separation proves unendurable. So they resume marriage, vowing "not to be afraid of life or of any of the beautiful things life may bring." Among these, of course, are to be children and a house.

Is this merely a return to their villages, merely domestic sentimentalism in a lovely guise? Mr. Dell has gone a little too deep to incur the full suspicion. He has got very near to the biological foundations of two lives, where, for the moment, he rests his case. There is more to come, however, in this spiritual history,

whether Felix Fay knows it or not. Let the house be built and the children be born, and Felix and Rose-Ann, though citizens and parents, will still be individuals and will still have to find out whether these complicated threads of loyalty last better than the simple threads which broke. Felix, in discovering the lure of stability, has not necessarily completed the circle of his life. Freedom may allure him again.

The Briary-Bush, less varied than *Moon-Calf*, is decidedly profounder. It hovers over the dark waters of the unconscious on perhaps the surest wings an American novel has ever used. Though it has probed difficult natures and knows them thoroughly it does not flaunt its knowledge but brings it in only when it can throw some revealing light upon the outward perplexities of the lovers. Thus it gives depth and timbre to the story, and yet allows the characters to seem actual persons actually walking the world. At the same time, Mr. Dell does not possess a too vivid sense of externality. In both his novels all facts come through the mist of Felix's habitual confusion, and in that mist they lose dramatic emphasis; muted, they are not able to break up the agreeable monotone in which the narrative is delivered. But underneath these surfaces, seen so poetically, there is a substantial bulk of human life, immemorial folkways powerfully contending with the new rebellion of reason.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Domesday Book, *Poor White*, *The Anthology of Another Town*, *Main Street*, *Miss Lulu Bett*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Romantic Woman*, and *Moon-Calf* would make 1920 remarkable even if that year had not brought forth other novels of equal rank; if it had not brought forth James Branch Cabell's richly symbolical romance *Figures of Earth* and Upton Sinclair's bitter indictment *100%*. And though most of these seem somber, there came along with them another novel in which were gaiety and high spirits and the fires of youth.

F. Scott Fitzgerald in *This Side of Paradise* also had broken with the village. He wrote of his gilded boys and girls as if average decorum existed only to be shocked. But he made the curious discovery that undergraduates could have brains and still be interesting; that they need not give their lives entirely to games and adolescent politics; that they may have heard of Oscar Wilde as well as of Rudyard Kipling and of Rupert Brooke no less than of Alfred Noyes. Mr. Fitzgerald had indeed his element of scandal to tantalize the majority, who debated whether or not the rising generation could be as promiscuous in its behavior as he made out. It is the brains in the book, however, not the scandal, which finally count. His restless generation sparkles with inquiry and challenge. When its elders have let the world fall into chaos, why, youth questions, should it trust their counsels any

longer? Mirth and wine and love are more pleasant than that hollow wisdom, and they may be quite as solid.

This Side of Paradise comes to no conclusion; it ends in weariness and smoke, though at last Amory believes he has found himself in the midst of a wilderness of uncertainties. Yet how vivid a document the book is upon a whirling time, and how beguiling an entertainment! The narrative flares up now into delightful verse and now into glittering comic dialogue. It shifts from passion to farce, from satire to lustrous beauty, from impudent knowingness to pathetic youthful humility. It is both alive and lively. Few things more significantly illustrate the moving tide of which the revolt from the village is a symptom than the presence of such unrest as this among these bright barbarians. The traditions which once might have governed them no longer hold. They break the patterns one by one and follow their wild desires. And as they play among the ruins of the old, they reason randomly about the new, laughing.

Dorothy Canfield

If Floyd Dell seems in *The Briary-Bush* to hint at the human necessity to turn back by and by from freedom, Dorothy Canfield in *The Brimming Cup* pretty clearly argues for that necessity. Doubtless it is to go too far to claim, as certain of her critics do, that she had made a counter-attack upon the assailants of the village and the established order, but it is sure

that she gave comfort to many spirits disturbed by the radical outbursts of 1920. Already in *The Squirrel Cage* and *The Bent Twig* she had shown an affectionate knowledge of the ways of households in small communities; and in *Hillsboro People* she had added another hardy, kindly neighborhood to the American array of villages in fiction. *The Brimming Cup* sounded a deeper note than any she had yet struck. Suppose, the novel says, there were a woman who had been trained in the wide world but was now living in a distant village; suppose she had heard and felt the tumult of the age and had begun to question the reality of her contentment; suppose, to make the conflict as dramatic as possible, she should find herself tempted by a new love to give up the settled companionship of her husband and the heavy burden of her children to seek joy in a thrilling passion.

Here Dorothy Canfield had an admirable theme and she rose to it with power, but she permitted herself so easy a solution that her argument stumbles lamentably. The lover who disrupts the warm circle of Marise's life is after all only a selfish bounder, a mere villain; stirred as she is by the promises he holds out of rapture and of luxury, she would be simply foolish not to comprehend, as in the end she does, that she must lose far more than she could gain by the exchange she contemplates. Surely this is no argument in favor of loyalty as against love: it is only a defense of loyalty, which does not need it, as against a fleeting instability; and so it is hardly half as significant as it might have

been had the conflict been squarely met, great love contending with great loyalty. Yet while the novel thus falls short of what it might have undertaken it has numerous excellences. It is eloquent and passionate and, very often, wise. Rarely have a mother's relations with her children been so subtly represented; rarely have the manners of a New England township been more convincingly portrayed. The setting glows among its green hills and valleys, its snow and flowers. There are minor characters that stand up vividly in the memory, like persons known face to face. The atmosphere is at once tense with desire and spacious with understanding. Though the materials come from an old tradition they have been heated with the fires of the scrutinizing mind which burn beneath the newer novelists.

1921

That memorable year of fiction which saw so many superior books produced saw them successful beyond any reasonable expectation; and it is scarcely to be wondered at that the year following—with which this chronicle does not undertake to deal—should have responded to such encouragement. If Dorothy Canfield challenged the tendency, Booth Tarkington saw it and ventured *Alice Adams*. Sherwood Anderson in *The Triumph of the Egg* and Floyd Dell in *The Briary-Bush* proceeded to other triumphs. Half a dozen competent novelists followed naturalism into the "exposure" of small towns or cramped lives: particularly

C. Kay Scott with the hard, crisp *Blind Mice* and Charles G. Norris, rival of his brother Frank Norris in veracity if not in fire, with *Brass*. John Dos Passos in *Three Soldiers*, the most controverted novel of the year, dealt brilliantly with the unheroic aspects of the American Expeditionary Force. Evelyn Scott in *The Narrow House* and Ben Hecht in *Erik Dorn* attempted, as Waldo Frank had already done in *The Dark Mother* and as some others now did less notably, to find a more elastic, a more impressionistic technique, breaking up the "gray paragraph" and quickening the tempo of their narratives. At the same time romance once more showed its perennial face, suggesting that the future does not belong to naturalism entirely. Donn Byrne in *Messer Marco Polo* played in a bright Gaelic way with the story of Marco Polo and his quest for Golden Bells, the daughter of Kubla Khan. Robert Nathan wrote, in *Autumn*, an all but perfect native idyl, grounded well enough in local color, as suggestive of the soil as an old farmers' almanac, and yet touched with the universal fingers of the pastoral. If American fiction cannot long escape the village, at least here is a village of a sort hardly thinkable before the revolt began. No matter what a flood of angry truth *Spoon River Anthology* let in, beauty survives. Many waters cannot quench beauty. What truth extinguishes is the weaker flames.

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